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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

SECOND SEPTEMBER NUMBER

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

THE LAST EMPIRE
by D. S. Halacy, Jr.

DOUBLE TAKE
by Tess Trahern

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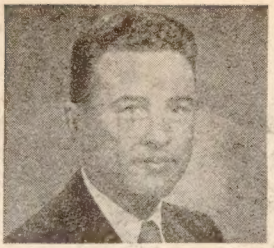

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND SEPTEMBER NUMBER

September 7, 1956
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RANCH ROMANCES

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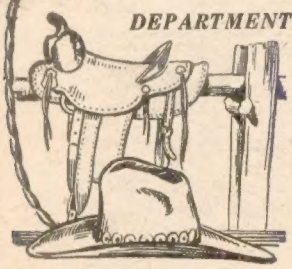

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Stamp Collector

Dear Editor:

I am 17, have brown hair and eyes, stand 5'11", and weigh 140 lbs. My hobby is collecting stamps. I would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 17.

MALCOLM WEBLER, JR.

175 York
Bangor, Maine

Sports Lover

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for a long time, and I enjoy it. I sure would like to get in your column and hear from boys and girls of all ages. I am 13, stand 4'11", weigh 100 lbs., and have blond hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are swimming, skating and horseback riding. So come on, kids, grab your pencil and paper and write to me. Will also exchange snapshots.

LINDA SHAWVER

Route #2
Meridian, Idaho

Loves The Great Outdoors

Dear Editor:

I have been a faithful reader of RANCH ROMANCES for some time, and enjoy your Air Mail column. I am 30 years old, weigh 147 lbs., stand 5'10", and have blue eyes and blond hair. I would like to acquire a few new friends through your column. I love all sports and the great outdoors, and promise to write some interesting letters about Colorado.

KENNY BECKER

3226-N. Speer Blvd.
Denver, Colorado

Music Lover

Dear Editor:

I just read a copy of RANCH ROMANCES and like it very much. I am 18, stand 5'8" tall, weigh 145 lbs., have brown hair and hazel eyes. I like to write letters, and enjoy hillbilly and Western music. I would like to hear from girls from North Dakota and Minnesota, between the ages of 16 to 20, but will answer all letters received.

ELLIOT WINTERS

1541 So. Cherokee Lane
Lodi, California

Lonely Small-Town Gal

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl in a small town of about 650 people. I am 13 years old and have short brunette hair, and brown eyes. All you boys and girls, please drop me a line. I promise to answer all letters I receive.

CAROLYN LOONEY

Box 76
Mound Valley
Kansas

Outdoor Type

Dear Editor:

Won't you please enter my name and address in

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

RANCH ROMANCES? I am 40 years old, and would like to hear from pen pals in Oklahoma. My main interests are farming and hunting.

THOMAS SMITH

1107 N. Boston Street
Tulsa 6, Oklahoma

Small Town Guy

Dear Editor:

I would like to get into your Air Mail column, as I am a very lonely young man of 33. I am 5'5½" tall, weigh 135 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. I live in a little town, and it is always hard to get RANCH ROMANCES, so I appreciate every copy that I read. I will exchange snapshots. Please write to me.

T. M. ROWLIN

Buras, Louisiana

Wants to Write

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate it very much if you could squeeze me into your column. I am 19 years old, 5'2" tall, and have auburn hair and blue eyes. My hobby is collecting jazz and Western records. Favorite sports include swimming, horseback riding, fishing and hunting. Would like to hear from guys and gals from any country, especially from bedridden servicemen. So please keep my mailman busy by dropping me a line or two.

LINDA L. BREEZE

79 Caledonia Park Road
Toronto 10, Ont.
Canada

Lonely Airman

Dear Editor:

I would like to know if I can get into your column. I am a lonely airman, 23 years old, 5'9" tall, weighing 160 lbs., with brown hair and blue eyes. I am single, so would like to hear from girls between the ages of 18 and 25. I like Western

music and most sports. Will answer all letters I receive.

ROBERT R. TITUS AF 11264402
28Inst. Sq. Box 216
Ellsworth Air Force Base
South Dakota

Brother and Sister

Dear Editor:

We would greatly appreciate it if you would include us in your pen pal column. Gloria is 21 years old, 5'5" tall, with brown hair and blue eyes. Hurley is 23 years old, 5'11" tall, with brown hair and blue eyes too. We like most sports. Please let us hear from all of you.

GLORIA GAUTREAUX
HURLEY GAUTREAUX
714 East 11th Street
Crowley, Louisiana

From a Neighboring Country

Dear Editor:

I read your magazine RANCH ROMANCES regularly and think it's wonderful. I know how much mail means to servicemen who are away from home, so I would like to correspond with them. I am 17 years old, 5'1½" tall, weigh 126 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. I like all sports, and Western music. Will answer every letter, and will exchange snaps with those who wish to do so.

MARGARET LASHBROOK
Parry Sound,
Ont., Canada
Box 408

Calling Cowgirls

Dear Editor:

I am 23 years old, single, 6' tall, weigh 170 lbs., and have dark brown hair and eyes. I own a 600 acre ranch, and the nights are very lonely here. My likes include Western music, outdoor sports, and square dancing. Would like to correspond with cowgirls between the ages of 16 and 25. Will exchange snaps, and will answer all letters.

MAURICE ROY
Cote Camp
Latchford, Ont.
Canada
c/o A. B. Gordon

Horse and Dog Lover

Dear Editor:

I am 59 years old, and have brown hair and blue eyes. Would like to correspond with people about that age, or anyone else who would care to. I live by myself, so I have plenty of time to write letters. Am very fond of horses and dogs.

LORENA McCARTY
200 Pearl Street
Boulder, Colorado

A Distance Away

Dear Editor:

Would you be so kind as to publish my name in RANCH ROMANCES? I would like to receive mail more often than I do now. I am half Chinese, 5'6" tall, weigh 115 lbs., and have black hair and eyes. My age is 19. My hobbies include dancing, swimming, and outdoor sports.

MELIENA LEE
c/o Singer Sewing Machine Co.
P.O. Box 99
Montego Bay,
Jamaica, B.W.I.

Third-Time Hit

Dear Editor:

This is my third try to get some pen pals, and I hope I make the grade this time. I am a farm boy, 19 years old, 6' tall, weighing 168 lbs., with blond hair and blue eyes. My hobby is working with horses. So come on, girls, drop a line my way.

JUNIOR SMITH
Eu Bant, Kentucky
R.R. 2

Constant Reader

Dear Editor:

I am a truck driver who reads RANCH ROMANCES as soon as it hits the stands. I am 31 years old, 5'11¾" tall, weighing 154 lbs., with blond hair and blue eyes. My job takes me all over the country, but I still have time to answer letters. So please write, one and all. I'll be looking forward to hearing from all of you.

TOMMY E. TOMERLIN
Route #1
Teagul, Texas

Was Stricken

Dear Editor:

When I was a young girl I had polio, and I still have to walk with crutches. I am 28 years old, 5'3½" tall, weigh about 95 lbs., and have dark brown hair and eyes. I like country living, good books, and Western music. Would like to hear from people of all ages who come from all over the world. Won't you please bring a little cheer into my life?

WINIFRED FIERDIG
8704 Roberts
Kansas City, Missouri

Alone in the Clouds

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely airmen who would like to hear from girls between the ages of 16 and 19. Thomas is 18 years old, 5'10" tall, with black hair and gray eyes. Jerry is 19 years old, 5'11" tall, with brown hair and blue eyes. We will answer all letters we receive.

A/3c THOMAS R. HOOPER, A.F. 184892227
A/3c JERRY T. MITCHAM A. F. 14593792
802nd Air Police Sqdn.
Smoky Hill, A.F.B.
Salina, Kansas

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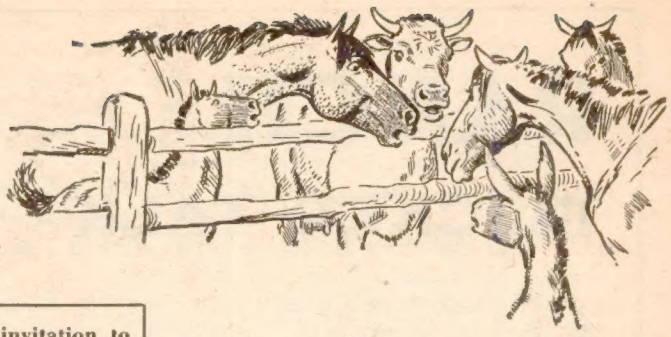

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

LOS ANGELES, Calif., police think the woman who called them to report seeing "a man in the bushes with a rifle" must be a little near-sighted. Investigating, they found a battalion of Marine reserves, fully armed, on maneuvers in the hills near the woman's home.

RETURNING a check for $20,000,025 to the air force, a Santa Fe., N.M., woman asked to be sent instead her monthly allotment check in the regular amount—$25. The big check, sent to her in error, was no good to her, she explained; her bank hadn't been able to cash it because they didn't keep that much money on hand.

WHEN a Dallas, Tex., man was arrested on a drunk driving charge, he asked to go to jail immediately to get some credit against his sentence. After he had five weeks of jail time, his case went to trial —and he was acquitted.

THERE weren't any trucks back in 1874, when Illinois enacted a law against gambling in "any building, booth, yard, boat or float." So thirteen Chicago men charged with carrying on a dice game in a truck were released, thanks to a lawyer smart enough to look up the old law.

POLICE thought a Port Huron, Mich., woman was pulling their leg when she called to report that someone has stolen her backyard. But they investigated anyway and found that someone had made off with all the soil in the yard, to a depth of at least two inches.

NEAT thieves stole the two rear wheels from a parked car in Denver, Colo., but they left the spare wheel in the front seat and placed four hubcaps in a straight row on a nearby lawn.

WHEN a Dayton, O., woman was hit by a taxi, she at least had the consolation of getting her injuries treated fast. Within three minutes she was in the hospital—conveyed there by an ambulance which happened to be right behind the taxi.

WITH a sigh of relief, a Detroit, Mich., gas company completed a three-year search for a former customer. Locating him in Tucson, Ariz., the company presented him with a 40-cent refund check.

WOMEN can sympathize with a Clinton, Ind., housewife who, while watching a fire destroy her home, lamented: "I wouldn't have spent half the night ironing if I'd known this was going to happen."

CHARGED with the illegal sale of liquor, when 41 fifths and 24 pints of wine were found in his room, a Seattle, Wash., man explained he was merely following civil defense instructions to keep a supply of basic essentials on hand in case of an A-bomb emergency.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor **BOB CUMMINGS**

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

REBEL IN TOWN

Civil War veterans, bringing old hates and loyalties along as they move West, spark the action in United Artists' new movie

AFTER the Civil War, soldiers from both sides headed West to try to make new lives for themselves and their families. Some of them settled down in the new wild country, and helped to make it prosperous and law-abiding. Others rode the outlaw trails, robbing and killing and helping to give the West its reputation for wildness.

A new Western movie, *Rebel in Town,* released by United Artists, is about both kinds of war veterans. One family (John Payne, Ruth Roman and a little boy, Bobby Clark) have started ranching in Arizona Territory. John is an ex-major in the Union Army, whose hatred of rebels prompts him to join the local posse, which is hunting down some Confederate soldiers turned bank robbers.

These men are a family too, played by J. Carroll Naish as the father. His four sons are Ben Johnson, Sterling Franck, John Smith and Ben Cooper. They had been cavalrymen in the War Between the States, and when they got back to their Alabama home, they found it completely destroyed. So they, too, went West, but their desperation led them to rob a bank. They are the outlaws sought by the posse.

Rebel in Town isn't just a pure cops-and-robbers story, however. Family loyalties and wartime loyalties are involved too.

Two of the robbers, trying to get water, are startled by the little boy, and he is shot and killed. One of the brothers, Ben Cooper, wants to stay to help the boy. But the other —the one who fired the shot, John Smith— convinces him that they'd both better make a run for it.

It is the innocent brother who is eventually caught by a lynch mob. And finally John Payne, who is the father of the dead boy, and who once fought for the Union, has to side with a man who fought for the Confederacy.

There's plenty of action and excitement in *Rebel in Town,* and there's real acting and characterization too. Ruth Roman's part, for instance, is full of conflict. She has lost her only son, but she is not vengeful. She rises above her grief to save an innocent man, and she tries to persuade her husband that justice is more important than revenge.

John Payne's fight is as much against the bitterness in his heart as it is against the murderer of his son. And when he stands beside an old enemy to fight off a lynch mob, you know he has won the bigger battle.

John is one of the most versatile actors in Hollywood. He switches from light comedy to heavy drama to outdoor adventure with the greatest of ease. He made his name on radio; he was successful on the Broadway stage; he's a star in Hollywood. But he's still not satisfied.

His real ambition is to be a great singer, which is a desire he must have inherited from his mother, who sang in grand opera. He has made some Hollywood musicals, but that's not enough for him.

"The trouble is all in that word 'great,'" he said. "It's just not the right term for my voice."

The other John in the movie is John Smith, a name, believe it or not, that he picked for himself. His real one is Robert Van Orden, which sounds like a fine stage name to me.

"I thought it was too fancy," says plain John Smith, "so I chose the commonest one in the phone book."

It's a name that is probably going to become even more well-known than it already is. Ever since John played the part of the young honeymooner in *The High and the Mighty*, his stock has been soaring. His fan mail began to boom, and now John is among the top ten most popular newcomers on all the fan magazine polls.

He's not afraid that his present part of the cowardly killer in *Rebel in Town* will hurt his career.

"It would be much worse to get typed as a young lover," he says. "I think it's a good thing to let movie fans work up a good healthy hate for you once in a while. That way at least they won't forget you."

The most durable name in the cast is that of J. Carroll Naish, who knows all about playing villains. He's specialized in heavies of all nations from Arab to Mexican—with one exception. He's never played an Irishman in the movies or on the stage, even though Irish is his own nationality.

Ruth Roman and John Payne are held at bay by Ben Cooper's gun

CHARLTON HESTON
Bigger and Better

RANCH FLICKER TALK

IT'S LIKELY that nobody has ever grown at such a prodigious rate or to such huge proportions as Charlton Heston—at least to the eyes of audiences.

Four years ago he averaged about twelve inches tall, on our TV screens; now you can see him loom twenty feet high on the Vista-Vision screen in Paramount's *The Ten Commandments,* in which he plays Moses.

Chuck, as his friends call him, was the first actor to win Hollywood stardom as a result of his popularity in television. "I'd seen myself act in a few kinescoped productions, so I was used to being home-screen size," he said. "I can tell you it was a real shock to see myself several times lifesize on a movie screen. I almost went howling out of the theater in horror."

Charlton's pocketbook has enlarged at an even greater rate than his image. Ten years ago, fresh out of the Air Force, he had three dollars a week to eat on during his first season of looking for an acting job. He was married, then, too, to an aspiring actress named Lydia Clarke. "What *she* ate on was her look-out," says Chuck with a grin.

Finding a career in the theater, TV, and movies was no passing whim with him. He had made up his mind to be an actor when he was five and played in his first Christmas pageant. After that the Evanston, Ill., schools couldn't put on a pageant, a play, or even a puppet show without Chuck's having a hand in it. After high school he enrolled in Northwestern University's School of Speech, where, by the way, he met Lydia. They were married after graduation, when Chuck was already in service, on St. Patrick's Day, 1944.

His first job after his discharge was with a stock company in Asheville, N. C. The following season he went to New York, where he landed a job in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* with Katherine Cornell, who still remains his favorite actress.

Afterward he played in a few short-lived plays, but began to find his bread-and-butter (and his jam too) coming from television. His Hollywood offer came as a result of his TV appearances, too, and he was the first actor whose movie contract did not forbid his working in the other medium. His present contract with Paramount is for two pictures a year. The rest of the time he is free to make movies for other studios, or to work on the stage or TV, or even to be a flagpole sitter.

It's unlikely, however, that he'd want to do anything so frivolous. Chuck is basically a serious young man, though he has a sense of humor. He paints for fun, and likes strictly long-hair music. His favorite reading is Shakespeare and Hemingway, and his favorite sport is fencing.

His one other hobby is somewhat limited. He likes to cook—but only one thing, spaghetti. His recipe for the sauce is as follows: "A pinch of this, a pinch of that, by guess and by gosh, and cook for three hours."

The Hestons have one child, a boy named Fraser Clarke, who was born on Lincoln's Birthday last year. "You see, I have things pretty well worked out so that I won't forget important dates," said Chuck. "Both my wedding anniversary and my son's birthday are on holidays. It's an arrangement I recommend to all husbands."

Since coming to Hollywood he has played in several Westerns. He's a natural for outdoor dramas, with his 6′2″, 205 pound frame, not to mention his blond good looks, which come in handy for any part except maybe his current one of the bearded Moses.

Chuck's latest Western was *The Far Horizons* for Paramount, in which he played Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition. He likes to play any sort of part; they're all a challenge, he says. His pet hate is bad acting—in himself or anybody else.

Paramount

Chuck "grew" from 12-inch TV screens to 20-foot-high movie size

The Last

HELEN WANTED to be a cattle queen . . . and she'd stop at nothing to hold the one man who could forge her rangeland kingdom

BRYCE McCAME swung down from the saddle, leaving the horse at the trough. Feeling in his pocket for the envelope, he went up the steps of the white-painted ranch house that had been Harv Nielsen's when Bryce went away to school. It showed a woman's touch now, that of Nielsen's widow. Without admitting it even to himself, McCame was eager to meet the girl.

He rapped on the screen door with the back of his hand, and took off his flat-crowned hat at the sound of footsteps muffled in the rug. A girl answered the door, a young Mexican servant with a thin face. The white apron she wore crackled with starch, and she bowed her head gravely before she spoke.

"Senor?"

Empire

by D. S. HALACY, JR.

"Is Mrs. Nielsen in?" he asked. "I'm Bryce McCame."

"Come in, senor," the girl said, opening the door and stepping to one side. "Will you sit down?" She indicated a stiff-looking sofa, then disappeared into the hall.

Bryce moved across the room, feeling his boots sink into the thick softness of the rug. A wry smile crossed his face. It was different from what he remembered, a lot different. Even with what the old man had told him, he wasn't ready for the formal Eastern furniture and the severe wallaper. Helen Nielsen had brought this with her—along with the other things she had brought to Anchor.

He was looking down at the frilly lamp on the gleaming mahogany table when he heard the girl speak behind him, her voice musical and curious.

"Mr. McCame? It's so good of you to come; I've been wanting to meet you."

She held out a hand in a warm, friendly gesture, and Bryce was surprised at the strength he felt as he took it. The hand was soft, but not weak.

"Good morning, Mrs. Nielsen," he said, looking down at the girl who had married a man twice her age, then had become a widow when she was hardly more than a bride.

He had wondered what she had to make Harv Nielsen give up bachelorhood after so long, and now he knew. Helen was beautiful. Her white skin contrasted smoothly with the raven hair she wore drawn up high on her head.

"That girl!" Mrs. Nielsen said in a tone of resigned exasperation. "And I used to think I had a servant problem in Boston!"

She moved closer as she took Bryce's hat, and he was conscious of the white bosom showing above her dark gown. The scent of her perfume was crisp and clean, with none of the cloying sweetness he detested. Watching Helen Nielsen put his hat on the table against the wall, Bryce knew his father hadn't exaggerated in his estimate of her. Here was a thoroughbred, with grace and beauty in the shoulders and back she presented, and in the long, easy-moving legs. There was only one catch. His father was so damned obvious in his plans!

"I've brought along a check from my father," Bryce said, as the girl turned. "He's in bed with a bad leg, so it gives me a good excuse to meet my neighbor." He reached into his coat for the envelope and brought it out.

"I'm glad," Helen Nielsen said, and then colored and bit her lip. "Not about your father's leg, of course! But I've been eager to meet you since I heard you were coming back. Harvard, wasn't it?"

"That's right," Bryce said, putting the envelope in her hand. "I'm a lawyer—or rather, a lawyer-to-be. I don't have a shingle yet, much less a practice." The words brought to mind the other girl, the one he hadn't seen yet since his return.

He buttoned his coat, and Helen's eyes followed him. Abruptly, she reached out a hand and stroked the material of one sleeve.

"It almost makes me homesick," she said, her face softening into a smile. "You didn't buy this suit in Dalham County."

"No; in New York," Bryce said. "I've finished with the cowboy gear. I'm done with ranching." He smiled thinly.

"Oh? A man can ranch and still wear a suit like this," she said. "Your father is disappointed about your decision, isn't he?"

"I guess he's entitled to be," Bryce admitted. "His money put me through school, and he wants me to stay on and run XT. Aren't you going to look at the check?"

Helen Nielsen had put the envelope, unopened, on a secretary by the window. She turned back to Bryce, shaking her head.

"No," she said. "I trust Willis McCame. He was my husband's best friend."

"I'm sorry about Harv, Mrs. Nielsen. It must have been rough on you, losing him."

"Thank you, Mr. McCame," she said softly, lowering her eyes. "It *was* hard. Except for your father, I buried Harvey alone." She looked up, and her eyes glistened for just a moment. Then she shrugged. "That was a year ago. Time eases things. Could I offer you a drink, Mr. McCame?"

"You could," Bryce said. "You could call me Bryce, too. I hear the West is becoming real democratic." He smiled faintly.

"Willis and I have our troubles, at times," the girl said, indicating the sofa. "We're the last of the big rancher's in Dalham. He calls me Helen, by the way. Won't you?"

The Mexican girl appeared as if by some secret signal, carrying a tray on which a decanter and two glasses stood. She put it on the table before the sofa and left as silently as she had come. Bryce leaned forward, eyeing the widow quizzically, contrasting her with blonde Bea Copinger, the girl he had meant to visit first when he returned to XT.

"I'm a woman," Helen said, smiling faintly, "but I do a man's job on Anchor. I'll drink with you, Bryce."

THEY touched glasses and drank. It was still Harv Nielsen's good liquor, despite the ornate crystal decanter, and the bite of it was tonic. Helen made a wry face as she set her glass down and touched her lips with a napkin.

"I'm so glad you came," she told him sincerely. "It gets lonesome sometimes. Would you mind if I talked about the East for a while?"

He didn't, and for perhaps half an hour the conversation was of Boston and New York, of people and places they had known in common. From time to time, something Bryce said made Helen's eyes shine and brought a little exclamation of delight from her. It was pleasant for him, too, and it would have been easy to stay on longer. But the ride back to XT was long, and he had promised to check the tanks at Granite Basin.

"I'd better be riding back," he said finally, standing up. The liquor had relaxed him, and he walked easily across the room for his hat.

"I had hoped you'd stay for lunch. It's nothing like Delmonico's, of course, but Emilia is a better cook than she is a maid. Won't you stay?"

"Thanks," Bryce said, "but maybe some other time. It's been nice meeting you, Mrs. —Helen."

At the door he turned, his hat under one arm, and extended his hand to the girl. Her eyes were shining as she looked up at him.

"I'm going to blame this on the liquor, Bryce," she said suddenly, taking his hand. "But, really, I'm just not very proper."

Raising herself, she kissed him hard on the mouth, and for a brief moment her body was pressed against him. Later he could say that surprise kept him from drawing back, but it was more than that. There was warmth and promise in the impulsive caress. Then Helen stepped back, her face flushed with embarrassment.

"Good-bye, Bryce," she said. "Don't think too harshly of me, will you? And come back soon."

He turned away. When he looked back from the foot of the steps, the door was shut. Lifting the reins, he got into the saddle and rode out of the yard, wondering at the faint hammering of his heart that he could still feel. Then, angrily, he shook his head and spurred the horse. He had told his father before, and he would tell him again: he had schooled himself for the law, not to be put out to stud. Marrying a woman for her ranch was a cheap trick, and the fact that Helen Nielsen was all that she was made it even shabbier. Beyond that was the thought of Bea, which aroused an almost guilty twinge inside him.

He came on the herd just before he reached the Basin. Cursing softly, he pulled up and reached into his saddlebag for the glasses. There were four or five hundred head, at least, with three riders hazing them on. Behind them, a long stretch of XT fence had been cut and trampled into the sod.

His face tight with anger, he caught up with the herd as the leaders made the first of the tanks Willis McCame had carved out years ago. Yelling futiley, Bryce drew abreast of the three men. There'd be no stopping the cows from filling their bellies with water that belonged to XT. His father's grim stories began to take on a clarity they hadn't had for Bryce before.

"Who's running this show?" he demanded hoarsely. "You have no right to trespass."

"This is my herd, dude," a big, rawboned man said. He shoved back his hat, revealing a shock of unkempt red hair, and grinned. "What's it to *you?*"

He winked at the other two, and they reined closer, obviously to see some fun. They were sallow-faced, both of them, obviously brothers. One cut loose with a stream of tobacco juice in Bryce's direction.

"Maybe it's a detective," the spitter said sarcastically. "I hear tell McCame is

going to crack down on us fellers one of these days."

"I'm Bryce McCame, damn it. And don't tell me you don't know this is private property. Now get busy and take those cows out of here, pronto."

The first man said indulgently, "I reckon you're the one who's been away for a while. *Everybody* goes across XT, didn't you know? How else are we going to get a herd out of the country?" He nudged the man next to him.

"You can go around," Bryce said, trying to get his voice under control. The old man hadn't been making it up, after all. Things had gone to pot in the years Bryce was away.

"Anchor doesn't go around, eh, Shan?" one of the brothers said tauntingly. "Anchor cows go right down the middle."

"Anchor pays for the privilege," Bryce said hotly. It was true; his father had told him of the deal he had with Neilsen.

"Anchor pays, eh?" the man named Shan said with a leer. "I reckon you've been over collecting it from her, eh, McCame? How was it?"

FOR ten seconds, Bryce didn't move. Then, slowly, he got down. "Do you want to step off your horse and repeat that?" he asked. His face was tight, and his hands shook as he balled them into fists.

Shan's smile wavered uncertainly. Then he shrugged. His hands went to his belt and loosed it. He hung his guns over the saddle horn. As he climbed down, one of the others spoke nervously.

"I'll cover you, Shan. The son probably

BRYCE McCAME

SHAN McCARTY

has a hide-out gun stashed in that trick coat."

"He'll need more than that," the redhead said gruffly. His cockiness and his smile were back now as he squared off and waited for Bryce to shed his coat. The two brothers remained in the saddle, hands close to their holsters.

"All right, dude," Shan said. "Did Neilsen's widow pay you in full for the right to cross, or just give you a little something on account?"

Bryce closed fast, feinting with his left. He figured the heavy-set redhead would be a pushover for boxing, but he was wrong. Shan weaved out of range, and then leaned back, his right crashing against Bryce's face. Bryce stumbled and fell, and another blow drove him hard into the ground. When he pushed up, the jibes of the mounted men ringing in his ears, he had a new respect for Shan.

Sparring until his head cleared, he moved in again, and this time his right flicked against

the man's cheek as Shan sidestepped. With the big man off balance, Bryce threw the left he'd been saving. He was ready with the right for the clincher, but there was no need. Shan went down like a felled ox. Bryce stood over him, panting, and wiping at the blood coursing down his cheek. Shan was done.

"All right, get up," Bryce said thickly. The insult was squared now, and there was only the trespassing to be taken care of. "I'm arresting you for trespassing. This stuff is going to stop, as of now. Understand?"

Back of him, one of the riders swore. Bryce saw the gun snake out to cover him. He felt suddenly naked without guns, and realized how much he had forgotten in the years he was away.

"Put it up, Ike," the redhead snapped as he pushed to his feet. "Don't be a bigger damn fool than you can help."

"But, Shan—"

"Shut up. I'm not murdering a man just to cross XT. There's no need for it. All right, McCame, let's go. I've heard that you aim to be a lawyer. We might as well start educating you on how we do things in Dalham. I'll settle this personal business later."

He eyed Bryce with respect as he moved to his horse and pulled into the saddle. The pasty-faced brothers moved out toward the herd, and Bryce mounted.

"Trail 'em on to Stanton after they water out," Shan yelled, standing in the stirrups. "I'll catch up with you there. Ike, keep that gun in leather or you'll get into trouble."

Bitterly, Bryce realized he'd been had. By the time he could take Shan to Springville and charge him with trespassing, the two riders would have delivered the cows to the railroad. Seeming to yield, Shan was in reality laughing at him. Bryce had a tiger by the tail, and he realized he didn't know to let go. He couldn't very well run all three of them in. Cursing softly, he spurred his horse and rode east with Shan.

"Do you mind riding ahead of me?" he asked the redhead. "I want to be able to see the bullet, if you have any ideas about shooting."

Shan laughed. "I told you I didn't need to plug anybody. Here!" He dropped a hand, and it came up with a sixgun which he tossed easily toward Bryce. "My name is McCarty, by the way."

Bryce leaned out and caught the Colt. The metal was smooth and cold in his fingers. This wasn't the east, sophisticated and civilized. It was Panhandle country, with a law that wasn't in the books at Harvard. Thumbing the cylinder, he nodded thanks and shoved the gun into his belt, feeling a grudging respect for the man who rode alongside him.

There was another shock waiting for Bryce in Springville, in the person of the barrel-paunched sheriff. The lawman, whiskey reddened and sloppy fat, hooked thumbs in his sagging belt and laughed in Bryce's face.

"Trespassing, McCame? Well now, maybe a bright young feller like you can quote it to me chapter and verse, but you'd be wasting time. Shan, I reckon I have to do something. I fine you ten dollars, cash, for disturbing the peace. Shell out."

The redhead grinned, and fished money from a back pocket with a resigned attitude. "Here," he said. "Buy yourself some decent liquor for a change, Saffles. I've saved a hell of a lot more than that by taking the short-cut."

"Watch your lip, Shan," the sheriff warned, tucking the money in his vest pocket, "or I'll make it twenty next time. You, McCame, dig up ten likewise. This court plays no favorites."

"Court!" Bryce snapped angrily. "How can you fine *me*? I arrested this man; I'm filing formal charges of trespassing."

"Knock it off, or I'll add a charge of false arrest, Mr. McCame," Saffles broke in. "The town's about got a bellyful of your kind."

"You've got a bellyful of *something*, Saffles," Shan said tauntingly. "I'll see you around, McCame, and we'll pick up where we left off. Only you'd better get yourself a gun. I need mine back."

"Ten dollars, McCame," the sheriff said testily, one fat hand rubbing the gun on his hip. "Or do I lock you up?"

BRYCE took out his wallet and peeled off a bill. Fighting to keep control, he gave it to the red-faced lawman. He'd have added another, gladly, for the pleasure of burying a fist in the puffy sheriff's belly.

"Where will I find the judge?" he snapped. "Or does Springville have one any more?"

"We have one," Saffles said, adding the fine to his vest pocket cache. "Right now he's over at the county seat in Dalham. He's right nice feller, too, named Copinger—Harmon Copinger. He's Shan's father-in-law, too, almost."

Silently Bryce turned away from the fat sheriff and swung up into his saddle. He left Springville at a run, and did not let up clear back to XT. It was dark when he rode into the corral, but his anger hadn't cooled. Pulling off the saddle, he carried it to the barn, then went into the ranchhouse. His father was in the front room, his leg propped up on pillows on the couch.

"What'd Helen do?" Willis McCame asked his son, his leathery face cracking in a smile. "Bit you, eh?"

"I left her at eleven this morning," Bryce said impatiently. "Keep your jokes to yourself. What the hell kind of law is there in Dalham County these days? I found a herd watering at the basin, and tangled with a man named McCarty. When I took him to the law, he paid a ten dollar fine and walked out. I paid ten too, to a rumpot who went straight to the bar with the money. And I hear the Judge is named Harmon Copinger. How come you didn't tell me that?"

"You done talking now?" the old man asked dryly.

He was Bryce's height, and he had once looked like his son. Now most of the meat was gone from his frame, and his hair had turned almost white. "I tried to tell you things were headed for hell on a handcar, but you wouldn't listen," he said, eyeing the gash on Bryce's cheek. "Did you tangle with Shan McCarty without a gun on? You're a damn fool, Bryce. I figured you'd find out about Copinger soon enough, and would see I was right about the mess XT is in."

"Right now I'd agree with you," Bryce said, "in more ways than one. Our fence is trampled down, and the tank is probably dry by now. And that redhead's cows are in Stanton."

"Our?" the old man said, lifting his eyebrows. "Our fence is down? This morning *I* had all the grief hereabouts. It's nice to have company for a change. Maybe that widow did bite you at that."

"Don't you be a fool," Bryce said testily. "She has nothing to do with this. It just galls me to be treated the way Shan treated me this afternoon. I'm riding into Dalham in the morning to have a little chat with Judge Copinger. It's time somebody shook things up a bit around here."

"Welcome home, Bryce," the old man said, putting out a hand. His face was blank, but there was pleasure in his tone. "You'll find some wine in the cabinet next the fireplace, boy. It's good to have you back. Let's drink a toast to it."

"How about a drink to Bea Copinger, while we're about it," Bryce said coldly. "I hear she's sweet on this Shan sidewinder."

"You heard that too?" the old man said, smiling faintly. "You're smartening up fast, son—real fast."

The next morning Bryce found Judge Copinger at the courthouse in Springville. Bea's father was in his fifties, and gray streaked the full sideburns he affected, but his eyes were sharply alert. The judge's voice indicated education and breeding.

"Bryce McCame! This *is* a pleasure." He held out a hand, then indicated a chair by the rolltop desk. "Bea is looking forward to seeing you again, my boy."

"I can imagine," Bryce said dryly, "after what I heard about her and Shan McCarty." He sank into the chair, looking idly about the room.

"Four years is a long time, Bryce," the judge said evenly. "But my daughter has made no definite plans. Who told you about her and Shan?

"Your sheriff, Saffles," Bryce said. "He enjoyed meeting me, I'm sure. He held me up for a ten-dollar fine when I came in to prefer charges against McCarty for trespassing on XT land with a herd he was driving to the railroad."

"I didn't hire Saffles," Copinger said with a faint smile. "In fact I'd send him packing if I could. But this isn't the East, McCame."

"I didn't expect it to be. But I'm damned if I'll be treated the way I was yesterday. The small cattlemen have a gripe, but there's no justification for what I ran onto yesterday."

Copinger said, "Shan has gotten a bit out of hand, I'll admit." The judge cocked his head slightly, looking at the gash that still marked Bryce's face.

"I can handle him," Bryce said tightly. "It's unfortunate that I tangled with your future son-in-law, but I'll make the proposition anyway."

"What do you mean?" Copinger demanded.

Bryce looked around the small room, then back at Copinger.

"Can we talk here without being heard?" he asked.

"We can. What's on your mind?"

"All right, I won't beat around the bush," Bryce said. "How would you like to double your salary?"

"You're offering me a bribe?" Copinger asked mildly. He took a pipe from the desk and put it to his lips, watching Bryce over the top of his glasses.

"Call it a retainer. It's often done; you know that as well as I do. XT will match your pay if you keep us informed on county policy, and look out for our interests in court —like carrying out the existing laws on trespassing."

"Hmmm." Copinger struck a match and held it to the bowl, sucking on the pipe. "How do you know I'm not for the small ranchers, McCame?"

"I don't. But XT is just as bad off as if you were."

"We're both in luck," the judge said soberly. "I'm a misplaced aristocrat, McCame. Till now I've strung along with the small operators because it was smarter to do that. But I'd rather be on your side, especially when it pays off. You need help, I need money."

McCAME let out his breath in relief. It had been almost too easy. He rose, sizing up the judge. "One hundred and twenty-five a month, cash, paid in advance. Would that be satisfactory?"

"Eminently," Copinger said. "You are a trusting soul. Suppose I fail to deliver?"

"I have no choice," Bryce told him, taking out his wallet. "Besides, I believe you'll live up to the bargain."

He counted out the sum agreed on and leaned over the desk. As he handed it to the judge, the sound of a door opening startled him and he whirled, still holding the money.

"Father, how could you? Or you, Bryce?" a voice asked.

The girl was small and blonde, her eyes as blue as the judge's. Her face was tight with shocked anger as she confronted Bryce. He swore softly under his breath. It was a poor way to meet her again after all these years.

"You said we had privacy," he snapped. "Is this some sort of trick, Copinger?"

"Definitely not, McCame," the judge said evenly, unruffled by either of them. "She works in the anteroom, helping me with the journals. Bea, you are to tell no one about this, do you understand?"

"Is that what they taught you at law school, Bryce McCame?" the girl said bitingly, pointing a finger at the money he still held.

She wore a dark dress, with ruffles at the neck that failed to hide the agitation of her bosom, and even in anger she was attractive, in the fresh, innocent way he remembered.

"This is no concern of yours, Bea," Copinger said severely, his voice rising for the first time. "Was there something you wanted? Otherwise—"

"No concern of mine?" the girl echoed. "Isn't it bad enough the way things are now, without you helping to build XT up? Hasn't Willis McCame preyed on the little ranchers enough?"

"I'd say the shoe was on the other foot," Bryce said coldly. "Yesterday Shan McCarty trampled XT fence to drive through our range, helping himself to water for his herd as he went. Who's preying on who?"

"What right have you to fence in the first place?" the girl demanded shrilly.

"The right of ownership, Miss Copinger," Bryce told her. "My father bought and paid for land when no one else would dare try to develop it. He sank a fortune in it, and spent his life making something of it. Do you think God drilled those wells and dug those tanks?"

"You needn't be sacrilegious," Bea said. "Father, can't you see you're pitting yourself against Shan, our own kind? If McCame won't sell, let him feel our anger—him and that Nielsen woman!"

"That's enough, Bea! Go back and finish your transcribing, do you understand?"

The judge was on his feet now, moving up to Bryce to take the money from him and count it. The girl colored and bit her lip. For an instant, defiance flashed from her eyes, taking in Copinger and Bryce as well. Then her head dropped submissively. Turning, she went through the door and closed it behind her.

"Sorry, McCame," Copinger said. "She's young and foolishly romantic about such things. The fact that McCarty is paying her court has something to do with it too. She thinks Shan and the others are in the right, that XT and Anchor are blocking the spread of progress to the West."

"She's not alone," Bryce said heavily. "Every wagonload of immigrants going across XT accuses my father of worse, from what he tells me."

"As a first piece of information in return for my fee," the judge said, pocketing the money, "there's pressure in the legislature to make cattlemen put in gates every mile or so along their north-south fences. And I hear that Gilstrap, who's supposed to be Republican, will favor the bill if he gets elected. You might pass the word along to whatever votes XT and Anchor control."

"Damn!" Bryce said. He looked toward the door through which Bea Copinger had entered, and frowned. "How do I know she won't tell everybody in town of our agreement?"

"What difference will backing out now make? You might as well have the game as the name. Besides, Bea won't tell."

"I suppose not," Bryce said. "All right, Judge. Thanks for the tip, though I'm afraid it's too late to get a new man who's on our side into the election. We already have a gate every five miles, but nobody bothers to use it. I expect to be seeing you in court shortly, and all I ask is a fair interpretation of the law."

"You'll get it," Copinger said, "now that I have a stake in the thing. I'm not the man I was when I sat on the bench in Baltimore, McCame, but I'll make no excuses. A man does what he has to do sometimes."

"Save the sermon," Bryce told him, and moved toward the outside door.

There was something in what the judge said that touched a sore spot in him. By his own actions he had compromised himself, and he didn't want to be reminded of it.

HE WAS tense as he came out onto the boardwalk, but the town seemed half asleep. No one took any notice of him. He walked past where he had left his horse at the rail, and went on to the hardware store. Inside, he bought two Colts, and a belt and holsters to go with them. The clerk eyed him narrowly as Bryce paid for them.

"Are you young McCame?" he asked, as Bryce cinched up the belt.

"I am," Bryce snapped, meeting the man's gaze. He should have closed his mouth on the hot words that followed, but he was touchy from the encounter with Bea Copinger. "Is that any business of yours, mister?"

"No," the clerk said hastily. "None at all. Howdy, Mr. McCame."

"Howdy," Bryce grunted, and turned away.

Somehow the guns on his hips made him feel better. He walked back toward his horse. He had taken care of his business in town, so the sooner he got back out to XT the better. It was a different homecoming from what he had planned. But the law office could wait; it would have to wait.

A settler's wagon lurched down the road behind two stringy blacks. On the seat, a sunburnt farmer stared toward Bryce. Just as he reached for the reins of his horse, a girl called his name. He looked around and saw the judge's daughter coming toward him.

"Could I talk to you a minute, Bryce?" Bea Copinger asked. Her face was still flushed, and she shot a glance over her shoulder toward the courthouse.

"It's a free country, they tell me," Bryce said.

"Please don't ask my father to do it," the girl said. "Can't you see what will happen when people find out?"

"They won't find out," Bryce said harshly, "unless one of us three tells. Are you saying you'd inform on your father?"

"I'm saying you're trying to make things worse, Bryce," Bea retorted. "You're turning father against brother."

"Miss Copinger, I won't argue with a stupid child. When you grow up enough to see things as they are instead—"

He had half turned toward the rail, holding the reins in one hand, when she struck him, her hand stinging hard across his cheek. The blow opened the cut that had only half healed, and the pain made him forget himself. Dropping the reins, he caught both her hands as she tried to slap him again. His face twisted angrily.

"You little hellcat," he cried, "I ought to whale the stuffing out of you!" Yet he felt more than anger; there was something else.

A hoarse shout rang out behind him, echoed by the vicious crack of a whip. Bryce's hat flew off, and he let Bea go, his hands dropping instinctively to the guns he had just buckled on.

"Keep 'em high, McCame!"

The voice was familiar, and he knew as he stiffened that it was Shan McCarty. The man must have been drawn by the sound of the argument with Bea. He was backed up by the two brothers who had driven the herd to Stanton the day before. The gaunt-faced cowboys had their guns drawn, and leveled on Bryce's belly.

Bea was crying now. The farmer from whom Shan had wrested the whip gawked foolishly from the seat of his wagon, making no effort to drive on.

"I'm all right, Shan," Bea said tearfully. "Don't hurt him."

"You think I'm going to let this high-and-mighty son rough up my girl that way?" Shan demanded. "I'll give him a hiding he won't forget."

The whip snaked back, and there was no time to get clear. The leather coiled around Bryce's arm, biting into the flesh. He retreated into the street, making for his horse that had edged skittishly away from the rail at the first commotion.

As he caught at the trailing reins, a shot blasted overhead and he flinched, pulling himself tight. The horse whinnied shrilly and fled in terror. On the sidewalk, Shan McCarty laughed as he viciously plied the whip again.

In shame and anger, Bryce retreated from the cutting blows. A lathered patron came from the barber shop, and other spectators gawked from the courthouse steps. Grinning triumphantly, McCarty broke into a trot. His men were in back of him, their sixguns out.

Setting himself to catch the whip and tear it from the cowboy's big hands, Bryce heard the cry behind him. Looking over his shoulder, he saw a buggy moving toward him at a fast clip. There was a girl on the seat, a dark-haired girl he recognized at once as Helen Nielsen.

Bryce still wanted to tear the punishing leather from Shan and beat him savagely, but he thought better of it in time. As the buggy came alongside, he gauged the distance and swung himself up by the girl. Behind him, he heard the riders curse in rage. Two shots blasted out. Bryce swore softly himself, then turned to Helen Nielsen.

"Thanks," he said. "You happened along just in time."

"I didn't happen along," the girl said, smiling, as she swung the horse along a curve in the road. "I went to see your father and he told me where you were. I've been keeping an eye on you ever since I got here. You're quite a ladies' man, by the way, Bryce. Wasn't that Bea Copinger, the judge's daughter? What were you trying to do, force your attentions on the poor child right in broad daylight? For old sweethearts, you two behaved oddly."

A smile played on Helen's face, but Bryce was in no mood for joking. "She took exception to a deal I made with her father," he said. "When I called her on her queer logic, she plastered me a good one. So I grabbed her, and then her boy friend saw his chance to kill more than one bird with one whip."

Helen laughed aloud, seeming to find the whole thing uproariously funny. Then she handed the reins to Bryce and reached into her bosom for a handkerchief. While he drove she patted away the blood from his opened cut, and then held the frilly cloth to the wound.

SHE said finally, "Did this deal have to do with bribing Judge Copinger, by chance?"

"We used the word *retain,*" Bryce said. "It's already paid off. I found out that Gilstrap is a turncoat politician. Not that there's much we can do about it now. And next time I bring in somebody for trespassing, Copinger will go by the book."

"Suppose it's Shan who trespasses again?"

Bryce, riding in with a few men, saw the barn go up in flames . . .

She had leaned close against Bryce, one arm around his shoulders while she held the handkerchief to his face. The scent of her was strong in his nostrils, and he had to fight against a sudden desire.

"I think the judge will play fair, anyhow," he said defensively.

"You're a fool, Bryce McCame," Helen said. "A trusting fool. There's only one way to beat the small ranchers—my way."

Then, before he could pull away, she drew his face close to hers and pressed her lips to his. Somehow, his arm was about her, and she held tightly to him. He let go of the reins, forgetting the anger that had recently filled him, forgetting everything in the soft warmth of this strange girl from the East. He had been a fool to dream of anything being left of what he and Bea had shared. A man needed a woman, and Helen was all woman.

In the days that followed, Bryce wondered if he *was* a fool. The XT suffered more fence cuttings, and missed dozens of cows, probably to passing immigrants. There was a grass fire near the New Mexico line that burned out two shacks and toppled a windmill tower. The fire was no accident, but the McCames were helpless.

Gilstrap, the man Willis McCame had backed for the legislature, sided with the small ranchers on the fence issue, and the old man all but turned blue with rage.

"Helen's right!" he shouted, hobbling up and down in the front room of the ranch house. "It's gone past patching up with money and soft talk, Bryce. There's only one way to beat them down—the old way!"

Bryce argued, and thought he was winning time for his plan, but then Helen Nielsen, showed up, her pretty face tight with anger. Her foreman, Jonce Keeler, was with her, and the wagon was loaded with hides they had picked up on the range. The butchered cows had been prime breeding stock that had cost Anchor a premium. Willis McCame swore and glared sourly at Bryce.

"Some of your poor starving people did this, probably," he said, and Bryce swallowed uncomfortably.

Bryce had made a point of the fact that some of the farmers and other settlers were hard hit, and their depredations on the cattle were done out of necessity. But this was wilful destruction; most of the meat had been left to rot.

"All right," he said, backed into a corner now, "I know it'll be a fight, but I still say my way is best. If we had known sooner about Gilstrap—"

"Hell," Keeler cut in, "use your head, McCame. We're outnumbered at the polls, and we can't buy enough extra votes to even things up. I can stop this fence cutting and put the fear of God into the likes of young McCarty and those two drooling idiots he runs with."

"And I'm about ready to let him try," Helen said.

She wore a black skirt and a short jacket, and her face still hadn't softened. It was hard for Bryce to reconcile the coldness he saw in her eyes with the soft clinging of her on the ride home from Springville. She was a beautiful woman, and yet she had a streak of toughness that didn't seem to belong in a woman. Slowly Bryce was coming to realize what had made the girl stay on at Anchor after her husband had died. The glint in her eyes was like that in Willis McCame's, a righteous demanding of what she thought belonged to her.

"You've never fought a range war, Helen," Bryce said. "And that's what we'll touch off if we can't handle this thing the way I want to. Give it time; after a few convictions in Copinger's court these nesters will begin to think twice. I figure the judge will curb Shan himself, even without its coming to court. Once we break the trend, things will settle down."

"The East kind of softens a man up, it seems," Keeler said sarcastically. "Are you cautious, McCame, or maybe a little bit yellow?"

"That's enough, Jonce," Helen said crisply, and the foreman dropped his gaze.

But the girl eyed Bryce curiously, and it bothered him for some reason that she had called her ranch boss by his first name.

"Any fool can pull a trigger," Bryce said, controlling his anger at the insinuation. "I'll fight when I have to, but I want it to mean something."

"What does Shan McCarty have to do to you, McCame?" Keeler snapped back. "The boys on Anchor are still laughing about that whipping you got. Do you reckon that makes us any stronger in the nesters' eyes?"

"I said that's enough," Helen said. "You might as well go on out now, Jonce. I'll be with you in a minute."

The foreman shrugged and let his eyes move up and down Bryce's face before he turned and slouched out. It would have been a pleasure to smash a fist in the sneering Keeler's face, but there was trouble enough without their fighting among themselves.

"If it weren't for this damned leg," Willis McCame raged, "I'd be riding the range now after the sons! Bryce, I'm beginning to wonder about you myself. I built up XT for a purpose, and that purpose wasn't to chop it into homesteads for a bunch of snot-nosed farmers. Helen has the right idea." The old man subsided onto the couch, glaring up at Bryce.

"Now you take it easy, Willis," Helen said soothingly, smiling for the first time as she patted McCame on the shoulder. "Bryce is all right. He's a little too civilized, maybe, but we'll take care of that. Remember what the doctor said about your heart, too."

Turning to Bryce, she spread her hands in a little, helpless gesture, and came toward him. She was all woman again, the hardness gone from her dark eyes.

"Come out on the porch with me, Bryce," she invited, taking his arm in both her hands. "I'll have a little talk with him, Willis. You rest that leg, and stop worrying. We'll have this fight won before you know it."

THEY stood on the veranda, watching Keeler harness Helen's horses back on her buggy. Helen still held to Bryce's arm, and now she let her head rest on his shoulder. Her voice was soft now, and her perfume made it difficult for him to keep up his guard.

"I'm tired of wearing black, darling," she said. It jarred him so that he looked down at her. "I've waited long enough, Bryce. I don't want to be lonely any more."

"Helen," he said in confusion, "are you—"

"This time I don't even have liquor to blame it on, Bryce. I'm telling you I love you, that I want you to marry me."

"Helen."

He turned, facing her directly, and then she was in his arms, her body warm where it crushed against him. But she must have felt his holding back. She looked up, a question in her eyes.

"Is it too public here, Bryce? Jonce will be discreet enough not to watch."

"It's not that, Helen. It's—well, you know how I feel about things. I can see the other side of it, Bea Copinger's side, for example. It's not as simple as the old man paints it; you know that."

"No, it isn't," Helen said slowly, releasing herself from his arms. "I thought when she slapped you it would wake you up, darling." Helen's face was serious. Then she squeezed his arm and smiled brightly. "You do think I'm attractive, don't you, Bryce?"

"You know I do," he told her grimly.

It wasn't all physical, either. The strength of the girl appealed to him, in spite of the way he felt. In all Dalham, there probably wasn't as desirable a wife to be had. And yet—

"Good," Helen said triumphantly. "I know what I'll give you for a wedding present, darling—Anchor itself. With it and XT, you'll be royalty. Kiss me."

When he let her go he was dizzy, but not so much that he failed to notice the look he got from Jonce Keeler, waiting at the wagon for his boss. The foreman's face was twisted tauntingly, but there was more in the glare than that; there was something close to jealousy. Again Bryce remembered that Helen had called the man "Jonce" with easy familiarity.

Keeler helped Helen into the buggy solicitously, and Bryce returned the airy wave from the girl. Watching the buggy swing out onto the trail south, he thought of the embrace, of the girl's blunt proposal. She was a strange woman, for all her desirability.

Royalty, she had said, and there wasn't just light humor in the term. Helen Nielsen wanted that, and the thought came that she wanted it more to be queen herself than to make him king. XT and Anchor linked, stretching for miles north and south on the New Mexico border of the Panhandle, was a tempting thought. Willis McCame had held that dream for years, and Bryce was a McCame too. The two ranches combined would control the whole section more firmly than the two as separate ranches. It would be a real wedding present, a fitting one for Helen Nielsen.

Two days later, XT cowboys surprised the Comas brothers driving beef across the range. One of the XT hands flashed the deputy badge Bryce had arranged for, and they hauled the men in to Judge Copinger. The Comases got a shock at the amount of their fine, which Copinger set at a hundred dollars apiece. They couldn't pay it and were locked up.

Bryce rode in from a trip to the railroad at Stanton and heard the news at supper. Grinning, he looked across the table at his father, sure the old man would have to go along with him for a while now.

"I'm going in to file for punitive damages tomorrow," he said confidently. "We can

break this thing up without spilling any blood, just like I told you."

"Don't count on it," Willis McCame grumbled, still not convinced. "And don't push your luck too far. You'd better take a few men along if you have to go to Springville."

"I can take care of myself," Bryce said. "It was just that I wasn't back in the swing of things, that other time."

"What did you tell Helen that night?" his father said, changing the subject.

"What do you mean?" Bryce said edgily.

"Don't be bashful, Bryce. Look, that gal isn't going to wait for you to get as old as I am. You'd better tie the knot before she gets other notions."

"Are you back on that tune again? Don't crowd me, I don't like it."

"What do you want, boy? You'd be boss of Anchor right off. And when I cash in you'd have XT to boot." The old man broke off and winked broadly. "And don't tell me Helen isn't woman enough for a McCame. That little widow'd make a banty rooster pull a freight train!"

"Maybe *you* ought to court her," Bryce snapped, getting up from the table.

"You think I wouldn't?" Willis McCame laughed loudly. "She wants a young man, Bryce, you know that. Once she married for money, she told me. The second time is for real. There's blood and breeding there. Harv knew that, the old fool. Probably he was thinking of her the time he fell off the pony and killed himself."

"Some things a man has to do himself," Bryce said, holding tight to the back of his chair. "I told you I'll not be a stud horse for you."

"Seems you're telling me an awful lot lately, Bryce," McCame said. "You wouldn't be thinking about that corn-fed Copinger filly?"

"Only to whale hell out of her," Bryce snapped. "Look, if it's going to be like this every meal, I'll take mine in the bunkhouse from now on. I'm riding in to Springville early. Goodnight."

HE RODE into town before eight, and caught Judge Copinger still at breakfast. "McCame, have a cup of coffee with me. I'm about to go down to the courthouse, but there's no hurry. Bea! Come here, girl, we have company."

Bryce stiffened at the mention of the blonde girl and shook his head. "Thanks, Judge, but I'll just ride down with you."

"Sit down, McCame. Coffee never hurt a man. I insist." He pushed Bryce gently into a chair as the girl came in to take the coffee pot from the stove.

"Good morning, Mr. McCame," Bea said, keeping her eyes down.

"Good morning," Bryce said stiffly.

He was feeling the sting of her slap, and remembering the lash in the hands of Shan McCarty, and he had to fight to remain civil.

"I came to thank you for jailing the Comas boys, Judge," he said when Bea had retreated from the kitchen. "It should be a lesson to the rest of them."

"Seems a shame to take your money," Coping said, chuckling. "It was worth a fortune to see their jaws drop when I threw the book at them. They yelled like stuck pigs for a bit, but I guess it's sunk into those thick skulls by now."

"Are you having any trouble?" Bryce asked, setting down his cup. "Do you think the town suspects?"

"The town probably thinks I'm going crazy. I've already been told not to expect re-election next year." The judge shrugged indifferently. "As to suspecting, I couldn't say. Your dropping by might give them a hint, though you have a valid reason, with the Comas business. At any rate, Bea hasn't said anything to a soul. As a matter of fact she's had a change of heart."

"What about Shan?" Bryce asked.

"Shan? I don't know." Copinger's big face clouded and he pushed up from the table, buttoning his coat. "He tried to raise the money for the Comas boys, and argued with me to lower the fine. He hasn't been back since yesterday morning. Excuse me a moment; then I'll be ready to go."

Bryce moved toward the door, almost bumping into Bea as she came from the other room. Her face was flushed, and she bit her lip before she spoke to him.

"I want to apologize," she said, and he noticed that her eyes went to his face, lingering on the healed gash. "I think I was wrong."

"Forget it," Bryce told her roughly. There was still bitterness in him that he couldn't bury. "It makes no difference now."

"But it does," she insisted. "I was afraid for my father, and for Shan too. But I'd rather see Shan in jail than dead. Father has made me see what you're trying to do, Bryce, and I want to thank you for it. Maybe some day this mess can be straightened out. I pray that it will, and I'm sorry for what happened in the street that day."

"It's all right," Bryce said, confused now. The girl seemed sincere, and he felt an odd relief inside him that they were no longer feuding.

"I think I understand now that you had to take the lesser of two evils. Father's taking your money doesn't seem right, and yet, if because of that we can avert bloodshed—"

"We'll try," Bryce told her. "But don't think I'm selling out XT—or Anchor either, for that matter."

"Of course not. But I know you're fair, Bryce. I should have remembered that, and tried to see your side. You may find a way to stop all this fighting."

"Prettily said!" Copinger boomed from the doorway. Hat in hand, he smiled at his daughter and bent to kiss her. "McCame, I didn't put her up to this, mind you. At heart Bea is as fair-minded as they come. Shall we go to the courthouse?"

Bryce spent most of the day in town, trying to unravel the trespass suit. The small herd the Comas brothers had been driving was being held on common pasture between Anchor and XT, not far south of town. When it was determined that the beef wasn't stolen stock, Bryce claimed several head in damages. Then, with the idea that it might pay off, he paid the fine, and the sallow-faced ranchers were freed.

"Next time ask for permission to cross first," he told them. "Maybe we can work out a deal and save all this bother."

They grumbled sullenly, and refused the drink he offered to buy them, but it was plain that Bryce had made an impression of a sort. The time in jail hadn't set well with them, and they were glad to get out of finishing the sentence. Better still, half a dozen hangers-on took it all in, and the word would spread.

IT WASN'T the sort of treatment the small operators and the settlers were used to from XT and Anchor, and yet it wasn't all turn the other cheek, either. Given time, and some luck, Bryce thought, things could be worked out. You fought fire with fire, and votes with votes. An Easterner would be shocked at the thought of buying justice with dollars. But which was worse, that or doling it out with lead?

He left the courthouse feeling better than he had for a week, and leaned against a post casually to watch the town for a few minutes. There was an office across from the courthouse that was vacant, and his old idea of hanging out a shingle came back fleetingly. It might be a long time before he could, but the thought wasn't dead. What had Helen said? A man could wear a good Eastern suit and still be a rancher. It was true; the West was changing, moving away from what Willis McCame, Harv Nielsen, and the rest of them, had lived and died for.

As he straightened, he saw Shan McCarty come out of the saloon, a brown paper cigarette dangling from his thin lips. Shan saw Bryce and stiffened. He took the cigarette from his mouth and flung it into the street. Bryce sucked in his breath, but kept his hands away from his guns. He even forced a smile as Shan came up to him.

"Howdy," he said. "Nice day, Shan."

"For you, maybe," the man said sourly.

"Hell, man," Bryce said evenly, "what do you want, blood? I figured we were square after you had whipped me down main street."

"Pretty smart, aren't you? Handing out sops to morons like Ike and Jesse Comas to buy favors. And something tells me you've gotten to the judge even."

"All I ask is a square shake, Shan," Bryce told him. "We can get along."

"The hell we can!" Shan spat out viciously. "We don't fit in the same country, McCame." He turned on his heel and strode off.

For a week after that things ran along peacefully—too peacefully, according to Willis McCame. The old man tried to ride a horse and succeeded in twisting his leg when he dismounted. That galled him, and he vented his anger in imagining all sorts of mischief.

"You're whistling in the dark," he told

Bryce. "You think you're going to turn this county into a place like New York, with a cop on ever corner!" He snorted violently and shook his head. "I trust Shan and his kind as far as I could kick an anvil with a broken leg. Helen is patrolling her fences on the east. We'd better do likewise."

"She's wasting her time," Bryce said bluntly. "You know where anybody would cut fence in reprisal. Our east fence, at the immigrant trail, is the logical place. That way, the wagons heading West will get the blame. But I think you're wrong. With Copinger dealing out the law now, we have nothing to worry about."

"The hell we don't. You get a couple men on that fence. Give them scatterguns, too, and tell them to use them. Adkins and Slim Jeffries would be good for that chore. I don't want any yellowbellies who'll just look the other way when there's trouble."

"Suppose *I* go," Bryce said angrily. "We're shorthanded as it is. Adkins was to go up to Stanton for those Angus bulls you're set on experimenting with."

His idea was to avoid the possibility of a flare-up when they were this close to success. The two riders the old man had suggested would jump at the chance to blast a nester, whether he had it coming or not.

"Suit yourself," his father grunted. "Only don't forget that Helen is coming over tonight."

"I couldn't very well," Bryce told him. "You've reminded me twice now."

He rode east to the XT fence, then turned south along it. The two sixguns still felt heavy to him, and he had slid a shotgun in the scabbard, hoping he wouldn't have to use it. Some of the old man's pessimism had infected him, and he rode tight and stiff in the saddle, sucking in his breath each time he topped a rise. But he crossed the critical stretch blocking the old immigrant trail, and still there was no sign of trouble.

A warm spring sun shone, but there were clouds on the horizon to the west, and rain in the air. They could use that; the ground underfoot was hard and dry. Finding a broken top strand where the fence dipped, Bryce patched it with baling wiring. Then he took a break in the shade of a cutbank.

In midafternoon he contacted an XT crew out with a herd at Shallow Well. There was no trouble, and he swung north again on his backtrail, feeling better. He relaxed in the saddle, rolled himself a smoke, and set fire to it. With his mind at ease, he began to wonder why Helen was coming over that night. It was not just to play cribbage with Willis McCame; he was sure of that. He was still thinking about it when he heard the muffled explosion up ahead.

He swore, and dug spurs to his horse, trying to guess what had caused the roar. It was dynamite, he was sure; but how, and why? A man didn't need the explosive to cut a fence. The sun set before he reached the rise that overlooked the trail gashing through the hills. At first glance there was nothing. Then he made out the sprawled figure lying in the sandy bottom. Farther on, a horse limped in ragged circles.

EVEN before he swung down from his mount, Bryce knew the man was Shan McCarty. Bloody, his clothing shredded, he lay motionless, and Bryce thought him dead until he turned him over gently. Shan's face was cut to ribbons, hardly recognizable as human, but the lips moved and words bubbled out.

"Rotten—rotten—" Bryce made out, as he bent close.

Then, with a struggling effort, the dying man spat out Bryce's name and then went limp as a sack, blood from the wounds all over him soaking into the ground.

Still kneeling, Bryce looked toward the fence, reconstructing what must have happened. A pair of heavy pliers lay fifteen feet from Shan, and a post was down, a single strand of wire maybe ten feet long still fastened to it. The rest of the fence was a twisted snarl. The explosion had killed Shan, but beyond that it was a puzzle.

Had the man been trying to destroy the fence with the blast? There was only one alternative to that, and Bryce was puzzling it out when he heard the shout and the muffled pound of hoofs. Turning, he saw half a dozen riders approaching fast. Instinct made him break toward his horse, but he wasn't fast enough. There was no point, either, in draw-

ing his handguns. The band of riders surrounding him had their guns out, and their faces were cold and hard.

"Get 'em up, McCame," a beefy man with a red beard snapped.

As Bryce elevated his hands, another rider slid to the ground and relieved him of his gunbelt. "What the devil is going on here?" Bryce said, trying to place the men surrounding him. "Who killed McCarty?"

"By damn," the spokesman said, "you have your gall, McCame! We sure didn't do it. What did you do, have the bomb rigged so that when he cut the fence it got him?"

Fear joined the anger and confusion in Bryce's mind now. He hadn't killed Shan, of course, but it was plain these riders hadn't done it either. In desperation he took the only tack he could think of, stalling for time.

"How do you know he was cutting fence? And what are you doing here?"

"All right, McCame, it isn't going to make any difference as far as you're concerned now, so I'll tell you. Shan and the Comas boys aren't the only ones who are sick of the way you're beating us down. Shan asked us to come out and help him cut XT fence so we could drive out your stock. We can't fight crooked laws, maybe, but we can fight in other ways. We can fight murder, too!"

The rest of them chimed in then, their voices thick with righteous anger, and the fear became a chill that climbed Bryce's spine. As he started to protest, the bearded man lifted his rope from the saddle and held it up.

"Anybody want to wait for Copinger to dole out his brand of justice? Or do we hold court here?"

"String the rotten son up!" the rider who had disarmed Bryce yelled, shoving him toward his own horse. "Then we'll do the job Shan set out to do!"

"Listen to me!" Bryce yelled, a shrillness in his voice he couldn't control. "I didn't kill him!"

The bearded man kicked at him viciously, his boot catching Bryce on the shoulder and knocking him sidewise. The man back of him shoved hard, and he sprawled into the sand. By the time he was back on his feet, two of them had him and were dragging him roughly to his horse.

"Look, I'm willing to stand trial," Bryce said desperately. "I didn't kill him. Somehow I'll prove it."

"Listen to who's willing!" someone sneered. "You have no more say any more in things around here."

"Right! He's a yellow skunk, getting back at Shan this way for the whipping he got in town. Let's string him up and then go after his old man!"

His arms bound back of him, Bryce was boosted into the saddle. The horse was led farther into XT land, toward a clump of scrub oak.

"It isn't much of a tree, McCame," the bearded man said, grinning at Bryce. "But then, you aren't much of a man, either."

"This won't solve anything," Bryce said helplessly. "Take me to Springville, and the killing can be investigated. You'll be doing murder yourselves if you hang me.

"Shut up!" someone yelled. "Get the rope around the skunk's neck; I want to see him kick up his heels!"

Nodding, the leader of the party tossed his loop toward Bryce, and jerked it tight as it settled to his shoulders. Bitterly, Bryce watched him throw the coil of rope over a limb. Then the crack of a rifle swiveled his head, as he sought to find the sound.

One of the lynchers moaned thickly and flung up both hands as he pitched off his horse. The animal reared nervously. Two more shots blasted into the startled silence.

"Clear out!" a voice yelled from a distance. "You're outgunned two to one, Brady."

Alongside Bryce, the bearded man swore, looking nervously at his captive and then at the fallen rider. As more shots tore into the group, self-preservation won over vengeance. Dropping his rope, the man called Brady spurred his mount in panic and fled with the other four at his heels.

THE horse under Bryce started and he bent forward, whispering into the animal's ear to calm him. It would be hell to have the horse bolt now, and have the trailing rope foul in the brush and choke him anyway! Straining at the ropes that bound his arms, he was suddenly aware of two riders approaching from down the immigrant trail.

One was Jonce Keeler, Helen Nielsen's foreman. The other was the widow herself.

"Bryce," the girl cried, pulling up alongside, "are you all right?"

There was fear in her face as she leaned close, working at the knots that held him, and it seemed to Bryce that he had never seen a more beautiful woman. In another minute they'd have found his strangled body hanging from the stunted tree the lynchers had picked for a gallows!

"I'm all right now," he said, his voice strained and sounding unreal to him.

Many times he had wondered how he would face death, and the knowledge of how he had actually felt was small comfort. He had been frozen with fear. As Helen untied him, he noticed that Keeler had dismounted and walked over to the body of Shan McCarty.

"Good riddance," the foreman said. "He's had it coming a long time. I take my hat off to you, McCame."

"You can save the praise," Bryce said dryly as he rubbed his wrists. "I didn't kill McCarty. It's the last thing I wanted to have happen."

"Why, Bryce?" Helen asked, her face contorting in a frown. "Didn't those men just try to kill you? They're the same breed as Shan—nesters and rustlers."

"They honestly thought I murdered him, I guess," Bryce said, still not sure of what had happened. "I was patrolling fence, and had just come on McCarty. He was alive. He thought I did it, too."

"You're too modest," Keeler said, coming back from the corpse. "Hell, McCame, that dynamite bomb has been used to good advantage by ranchers before. You don't have to cover up for us." He winked and grinned broadly.

"All right," Bryce said wearily, "I won't argue. What are we going to do with the bodies of Shan and the nester you killed?"

"Not a damn thing," Keeler said harshly. "Let the buzzards do it for us. Eh, Mrs. Nielsen?".

"Don't be a fool," Bryce said. "We can't let them just lie there, no matter who they are."

"Don't you be a fool either, darling," Helen said. She had apparently regained her composure now, and she smiled at him. "What do you suppose will happen if you go riding in to Springville with the corpse? Even little Bea would try to avenge McCarty's death, Bryce."

She seemed to get some strange satisfaction of that, he thought. But she was right, of course. It would be sheer stupidity to brave the wrath of the nesters now.

"All right," he said, nodding slowly. "But we can at least bury him and mark the grave." He got down from the saddle.

"Grave!" Keeler said. "What do you figure to dig with, your hands? Count me out."

"Jonce," Helen said crisply, "Bryce is right. A shallow grave will do. It's a small enough price to pay to be rid of them.

The foreman grumbled all through the job, and swore loudly as they dropped the last stones on top of the mound of sand. When they were done he looked at Bryce, his eyebrows raised.

"Well? I figured you'd give him a send-off too, McCame, you being so holy and all."

"Let's go," Bryce said flatly, "before I tell you what I think of you, Keeler. Helen, are you ready to ride?"

"Yes, Bryce. We'll go on to the ranch with you. We were headed that way when we heard the shots."

"Don't tempt me, McCame," Keeler said, under his breath, as he and Bryce mounted. "I've about got a bellyful of you, anyhow."

Full dark caught them still a couple of miles from the ranch. Helen rode in close, even leaning over to take Bryce's hand. Her familiarity bothered him, especially with Keeler so close, even if he couldn't notice in the dark. The girl was too confident of herself, and it was almost as if she were pitting the two men against one another. Bryce dropped his hand as the two horses veered apart, and made no attempt to reach for her when she rode in close.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked softly. "You don't seem very grateful to us. We did save your life, Bryce. I could claim you now, in a manner of speaking."

IT WAS true. He was being childish about it. Keeler and the girl had saved him, at no small risk to themselves. If the nesters had chosen to make it a fight, Helen might

have been killed. Bryce should be grateful; he *was* grateful, of course. It was just that things were still too confused in his mind.

"I'm sorry, Helen," he said. "Forgive me. I'll be indebted to both of you from here on out. Maybe I'm still scared. I found out a while back what fear really is. A rope around a man's neck can make a coward of him fast."

"But you're safe," Helen said. She sighed softly before she went on. "McCarty did have it coming, Bryce, in case you're still blaming yourself. You were only protecting your own property."

"I've told you I didn't plant that bomb, Helen! What do I have to do to convince you?"

"I'm sorry, darling. But stop worrying, will you? It was the best thing that could have happened, whoever is responsible. Your father might have taken things into his own hands, of course. I shouldn't assume you did it."

As they rode on in silence toward the faint glow of lighted windows, Bryce pondered that. It was true. The old man was chafing at what he thought was Bryce's softness, and he had no faith in working things out peaceably. Could he have rigged the trap that Shan McCarty had blundered into? He knew the places the troublemakers would probably hit. He could have done it. Bryce swore under his breath.

"Anyway, it's done," he said dully, as they reached the edge of the corral. "And it's just the beginning, Helen. There'll be more than Shan's blood spilled before it ends. I'm wondering how the judge is going to take this."

"And the girl," Helen said surprisingly. "I wonder about her too, don't you, Bryce?"

It was strange she was thinking of that too. Bea Copinger was a torturing weight in Bryce's mind. He could see the girl as she had been when she'd said she'd rather see Shan in jail than dead. Bea would think Bryce had killed McCarty, and there was no way he could let her know otherwise. He didn't even know himself who had done it.

They held a council of war at the ranchhouse, and Willis McCame exulted grimly. Keeler echoed his angry words, and Helen Nielsen's eyes glowed with a tenseness that was almost frightening. It was as though she had been born for more power, as if she had planned everything carefully with that aim in mind. Bryce put the idea out of his head and tried to plan his next move.

Helen and her foreman rode out of XT to warn the Anchor hands and prepare for the onslaught that might come in reprisal. Keeler was boastful and overconfident.

"We'll run the farmers back to the crops they left in Kansas! They'll go like jackrabbits when they see Anchor's guns."

The nesters doublecrossed him, though, by hitting before there was time to bring in the far-flung cowboys. Before dawn the following day, shots tore the darkness apart, and lead smashed the windows of the XT ranchhouse. Bryce, riding in with a handful of men from the nearest camp, saw the barns go up in flames, and barely made the safety of the house.

Willis McCame, fuming at a window, kept up a steady return fire, but it was hopeless finding a good target in the faint light. Two XT hands, trying to make it from the bunkhouse to join the main party, were cut down just short of the porch. Cursing, Bryce pumped lead at the spouts of flame beyond the yard. He had tried and he had failed, and now they were fighting for their lives in a battle that meant nothing, but blind slaughter.

For Shan's life, and the other nester's, the town men had killed two, and for those two XT would demand four. The garish red billows of flame from the barn faded with the waning of the fire and the approach of day. No longer did dying stock cry out in shrill agony. But the stench of burned flesh was sickening.

Watching from his window, Bryce saw the boil of dust to the north, and feared momentarily that it was more of the settlers. Then gunfire broke out, shots directed at the beseigers, and a hoarse cheering went up in the barricaded ranch house. The crew from the Stanton drive had gotten wind of the trouble and now the shoe was on the other foot.

The town gunmen tried to make it a fight but caught in fire from both directions, they broke a few minutes after the reinforcements arrived. With three men lying in the road, they began a retreat from the ranchyard toward the line of trees that probably hid their

mounts. XT men broke from the house, rifles leveled and talking. Two more settlers fell, short of safety.

"Hold it up!" Bryce yelled. "Don't follow them into the trees, you damned fools. They'll cut you down sure. Wait till we can hook up with Anchor and we'll sweep the country clean to our east fence."

"Fence, hell!" Willis McCame said thickly. He leaned against the door jamb, a smoking Winchester sagging under one arm. "We'll chase them past town before we're done. Look at the barn! And what do you think they've done to any stock they came across?" The old man was haggard, and his breath came hard.

OUT in the yard, Bryce rolled an XT man onto his back, knowing as he did that the man was dead. When the tally was made, there were three XT riders dead, four more shot up badly. The cook was blind, his face a ragged mess of pulp. The nesters had lost even more. They had left six bodies to be ranged in the shade of the still-smoking bunkhouse.

A farmer, in hobnailed boots and bib overalls, was brought in, shot and likely to die. Half crazy, Willis McCame tried to beat talk out of the man, but it was useless. Then, toward noon, a feeble cry from the trees sent two men investigating. A nester lay doubled in pain, his leg splintered, and weak from loss of blood. When they threatened to leave him there to die, he talked.

"We didn't aim to quit till you and Anchor were both burned out," he said fearfully, eyeing Bryce.

"How many men do you have?" Bryce asked him. "Don't lie, either."

"Between forty and fifty, I reckon," the man said. He moaned brokenly as a man bumped against his leg, and sweat broke out on his face.

"Go on," Bryce persisted. "We'll set your leg as soon as you tell us what we want know."

"Forty or fifty," the man said weakly. "Judge Copinger tried to talk us out of it, but that just riled us up. And it looked as if we'd have to do the job sooner or later."

"Damn you!" Willis McCame cried. "What do you skunks figure to do, cut up XT for yourselves? All you're going to get is a three by seven plot, you—"

"Take it easy," Bryce said, pushing the old man aside. "Let me handle this, will you?"

"Are you going to kill me?" the wounded man asked dully.

"Not if you co-operate," Bryce said. "Where are the rest of the fifty men?"

"I don't know," the man said sullenly, his eyes going to Willis McCame.

"Talk, mister," Bryce said harshly, "unless you want to be roughed up some. That leg hurts plenty right now, doesn't it?"

"Half of us were to hit Anchor," the nester said. "We figured the widow would scare, and that would take care of that end of it. Then, when things cooled down, maybe we could buy good land at a fair price."

"Fair price!" Willis McCame thundered. He caught the man by the shirt front and half lifted him. "Do you know what I have invested in XT? Do you know who put down wells, and built Springville, you idiot?"

The rest was lost in a choking cry, as the old man fell forward over the nester. Bryce pulled him clear, not sure what had happened, until he saw the strained, purplish look to his father's face. It contorted, and McCame's hands clutched at Bryce. In seconds, it seemed, it was over. Willis McCame died as he had lived, in violence. His heart had failed in this moment of anger.

There was an emptiness in Bryce when he stood up. It almost seemed that the razing of the XT ranch had been an omen. The old man lay as dead as the ashes of the building he had built. The notion of revenge burned through Bryce and then faded. Everything was gone now, and because of hate and vengeance.

Willis McCame had built himself a small empire, but he had outlived his day. With his death, something went out of the XT bunch, who were standing ill at ease over the crumpled figure on the ground.

"I'm going to try to break up this feud," Bryce said quietly. "Anybody have any other ideas? I'll pay anybody off who isn't satisfied, and he can hit the trail West before there's any more killing."

The few mumbled protests were short lived. They could see the uselessness of more shooting as well as Bryce could. Half a dozen men

asked for their time, and rode out within the hour for the New Mexico line.

With his leg set and splintered, the nester was lifted into a saddle and sent toward Springville with a note for delivery to the judge, or the sheriff, whoever was in charge.

"Tell them we'll honor a white flag," Bryce called after the man.

Then he went inside, surprised at the gnawing of hunger in him, until he realized it was past noon.

He was dozing on the couch when a shout from the porch woke him. Fighting himself awake, he went outside. He levered a shell into the rifle as he stepped onto the front porch.

"It's the Anchor bunch," a cowboy with a pair of field glasses said in surprise. "Keeler and the widow are riding up front."

Bryce took the glasses and picked up the bobbing figures riding at the point. It was Helen and Keeler all right. A frown crossed his face.

Only half a dozen men rode behind them, and Anchor had forty cowboys.

"Bryce!" Helen cried when they were in earshot.

"Thank heaven you're safe!"

Under the flat-crowned hat her hair was disordered, and her face was smudged with dirt and smoke. In rumpled riding clothes, she looked little like the polished Eastern lady he had known.

"What happened at Anchor?" he asked tightly, as her eyes swept the wreck of the XT buildings.

"It's gone, Bryce," she said, and tears started in her eyes as she swung down and flung herself into his arms. "Half my riders ran out on me. This is all that's left. Those terrible men from town hit us before we could get ready."

"They paid for it," Keeler said harshly from his saddle. "You wanted a fight, didn't you, Helen?"

"Speak to me with respect, Jonce," the girl said to him, still clinging to Bryce. "Mrs. Nielsen is what you're to call me."

"Hell," Keeler said. "You're getting uppity again, eh? This isn't any parlor game we're playing now, *Mrs.* Nielsen. Tell McCame why we're here."

HELEN wet her lips and looked up at Bryce nervously. The bravado she had used on Keeler faded quickly, and she was a woman pleading now.

"Jonce wants to throw in with you and ride on Springville, Bryce," she said, "but I'm afraid."

"Shut up!" Keeler snapped. "You've said your piece. What about it, McCame? I have ten men; it looks as if you have about thirty. We can still make those sodbusters holler uncle."

"No dice," Bryce told him, pushing Helen gently away. "I've dispatched a note to the law in town, asking them to send a man out under a white flag. Too many men are dead already, my father included."

"Oh, Bryce," Helen cried, "I'm so sorry!"

"Did you kill the skunk who did it, McCame," Keeler asked, "or do you just figure to take him to court?"

"My father's heart gave out on him," Bryce said heavily. "How do I avenge that, Keeler?"

"I told you, smart boy—wipe out the whole lot of them. We can do it."

"Don't count me in on that, Keeler," a lean rider with a blood-soaked shirt said tiredly. "Reckon I'll see how this truce comes out."

In spite of Keeler's threats, the majority of the Anchor men sided with the speaker, and Bryce told them to light and rest. He helped Helen into the house, and left her crying in a bedroom. Keeler was in the front room, waiting, when he came down the hall.

"You're a fool, McCame," he said bitterly.

"Everybody's told me that ever since I got back to XT," Bryce said. "I guess they're right. You can stay or go; suit yourself. Right now I have graves to dig, so get out of my way."

The grave for his father was a low mound of fresh earth alongside the place where they had buried his mother five years earlier. Bryce marked it with a stone from the creek, and the old man's hat. After the others had left him alone, he took off his own Stetson and just stood there.

It was hard to pray, because everything worth praying for was gone, so he merely bowed his head and watched the shadows of the oak through half-closed eyes that were moist with slow tears. At a noise back of him, he

whirled cat-like, his hand driving for his Colt. Helen Nielsen pulled up short, and he swore softly.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, standing near him. "Is there something I can do, Bryce?"

"There's nothing," he told her, rolling the brim of his hat in numb hands. "It's already been done. I don't even know how this thing was touched off." His voice went helpless and bitter. "I tried so damned hard to straighten things out. If Shan hadn't been killed—"

Helen looked away for a moment, and when she turned her head back to him her throat was working. She moistened her lips and seemed nervous.

"I don't know either, Bryce. But, as you say, it's done and there's no changing it." She moved close, her fingers stroking his arm, and her voice lowered.

"Come away with me, Bryce, before it's too late. I wanted Anchor and you, but I've lost the ranch now. I can't lose you too."

"Lost Anchor?" he repeated. "You can rebuild, Helen. Sure, we both lost heavily, but there's still the land." His voice was weak, as if he only half believed what he was saying, and he tried to strengthen it. "We'll find out just what happened," he went on. "Somehow we'll work it out. We'll open the immigrant trail wide, and mark out a north-south crossing to the railroad. I don't know yet how, but we'll do it."

"You can't!" Helen said, her voice rising. "I'm afraid, Bryce. I didn't know it would be like this; I've never seen men die that way." She shuddered, and a wave of pity for the girl swept him. Helen wasn't as hard as she had seemed to him at times; she was a woman, for all her ambition and dreams of power.

As he held her to him, he saw the rider approaching from beyond the east pasture. His body stiffened, and then he made out the white rag fastened to the stick the rider carried. Quickly he pushed Helen away from him.

"You'd better get in the house," he said, pointing to the truce-bearer, "in case this is some sort of trick." Even in his wildest hopes he hadn't expected results so soon from the note he had sent by the injured nester. Helen put a hand to her throat and turned to run for the safety of the house.

Bryce and half a dozen cowboys met the lone rider on the road, just beyond the corral. From the porch, the others covered them against a trap of some kind. The rider with the flag was slight, and clad in levies and a white shirt. Squinting, Bryce suddenly swore.

"That's a woman!"

"It sure is," a cowboy echoed in wonder. "That's Judge Copinger's gal."

He was right. Bea Copinger rode into the waiting circle of XT men, her face a taut mask when she spoke to Bryce.

"I'll talk to you personally," she said, "or I ride back to Springville. Is that clear?"

"Why didn't they send a man?" someone growled.

"They figured you'd be less apt to shoot me," Bea said coldly. "I doubt it myself. I meant what I said, Bryce McCame. I talk to you in private or there's nothing to discuss."

"Is that all right with the rest of you?" Bryce asked, looking from face to face about him. Bea's appearance had jarred him, but there was no point in refusing to bargain with a woman. It had taken a lot of courage on her part to come to XT after what had happened.

"It's a waste of time," someone protested.

But another man said, "We have no choice, McCame. Talk to her."

"Not here," Bea said. "Back there in the grove. Or are you afraid of a woman?" There was a taunt in her voice.

"Ride out," Bryce told her bluntly.

THERE was little danger that nesters had staked out the trees, and the girl was unarmed. He urged his horse after hers, following at a trot. The girl rode straight and stiff, the staff with its truce flag leaning like a banner on her shoulder. At the line of oaks, she reined up and turned to him.

"This is far enough," she said. "We'll talk here."

"Did the judge send you?" Bryce said. He was remembering Shan's torn body, wondering if the girl had seen the rude grave he had made for her friend.

"My father is dead," she lashed out suddenly, "and you killed him, Bryce McCame, just as surely as you murdered Shan!"

"I haven't seen the judge since last time I was in Springville," Bryce protested, shocked

at the vehemence of the accusation. "As for Shan McCarty—"

"Don't lie!" Bea said, her voice brittle. "You killed him without provocation. Shan didn't come to cut your fence; he wanted to bargain for crossing rights. I had argued half the night with him about it, and made him see that was the right way. So you dynamited him for revenge. Now I'm going to kill you."

The gun seemed to leap from her bosom into her right hand, a derringer, probably a single shot, but deadly at pointblank range. Her body was rigid as steel wire, and the gun was unwavering. Bryce had trouble believing it was happening.

He said desperately, "You said the judge was dead?"

"The mob killed him on the way out here," Bea said, her voice nearly breaking. Tears welled in her eyes, and she caught her breath before she could go on. "They learned he was in league with XT and Anchor; he paid for the few dollars you bought him with."

Bryce had seen the movement fifty feet beyond her horse, and had recognized Jonce Keeler riding from the trees, his gun drawn and aiming. He must have read the truth and seen the derringer Bea held on Bryce. With no thought of himself, Bryce's hand went for his own gun.

He cleared leather with it and squeezed the trigger as the derringer went off. Simultaneously with the crack of the small gun two feet from him, he smelled the acrid stench of powder, and felt something slam into his chest.

In a blur, he thought he saw Jonce Keeler pitch sidelong from his mount. Then Bea's scream came to him. He knew he was falling, and he dropped his gun, trying to fend off the ground with arms that buckled. Then there was only blackness, shot with flashes of light that somehow coincided with the pain in his chest.

Later, it was the sound of Bea's crying that woke him. Dreamlike, he had thought it was Helen Nielsen, as he fought to open his eyes. But, blinking to see, he made out the blonde girl bending over him. He tried to speak and couldn't because of the torturing weight that seemed to press down on his chest.

He was lying on his back on the porch of the XT ranch house. He could see the smashed windows, and the splintered gouges where bullets had torn the siding. Slowly the fighting came back to him. He pieced it together up to the time Keeler had leveled his gun at Bea Copinger. Oddly, there was silence now except for her crying. Bea looked at Bryce's face then, and her eyes widened in shock.

"Bryce, I thought you were dead!" She looked at his chest, biting her lip.

HE TRIED to see, barely made out a mound of blood-stained cloth bound to him, and let his head sink back weakly. When his voice came he asked, "Keeler didn't hit you?"

"No, Bryce. Your shot killed him instantly. His went wild. You saved my life, Bryce, when I had all but killed you." There was a question in her eyes, as though she couldn't comprehend such a thing.

"Maybe you should have," he said bitterly. "Shan is dead. You deserve revenge for that."

She leaned forward then, burying her face in her trembling hands. Her voice came brokenly, interspersed with sobs, as she told him what had happened.

"Keeler killed Shan," she said. "That Nielsen woman, Bryce. She put him up to it, playing him against you. He was to have part of Anchor, but he wanted even more."

"Helen told you all this?" Bryce asked wonderingly. "Is she here?"

"No, Bryce," Bea said.

She had stopped crying, and she regarded him now with eyes that seemed to be trying to pierce his thoughts. She seemed to want to know what Helen Nielsen had really been to him. She would never put it in words, though, he was sure. It would be up to him.

"Mrs. Nielsen is gone," she said softly. "She rode for Stanton an hour ago; there's a train she thought she could catch. She's returning to the East, Bryce. She won't be back."

Bryce swore softly, stunned at all that had happened while he lay unconscious. "What did she say?" he asked. "Was there any message for me?"

"There's a deed to Anchor, Bryce. She put it in your father's desk." Bea dropped her eyes before she went on. "She said something about a wedding present, Bryce. She said you'd understand."

Vaguely, he did. Helen had failed in her dream of power. She had lost Anchor, at least the Anchor she wanted, and she had lost him too. Remembering Jonce Keeler, Bryce knew how desperately the girl had played her cards. And now, unable to face it, she was running out.

"She made mistakes," he said softly, "but I won't judge her."

"I was wrong too, Bryce," Bea said, her voice stricken. "I accused you of killing Shan, and that was wrong. I was wrong about him too. He told me he was coming to XT peaceably, the way I wanted him to. But I know now he had half a dozen men at his back, that he was cutting your fence when—" She broke off, her voice choking, and in pity Bryce reached his arms up to her. "Don't die, Bryce! Please don't *you* die! I'm so terribly alone now." She cried like a small child, and in a way she was.

There was a muffled sound in the distance, beyond the corral, and Bryce rolled his head enough to see the line of troopers riding on the ranch house. It surprised him only slightly. Someone, Saffles probably, had gotten in touch with the army. There would be a martial law until the war was finished. It was all but finished now.

"I won't die, Bea," he said grimly.

XT and Anchor were through, the last of the empires men such as Willis McCame had dreamed of. But there was another kind of empire coming, a kind Helen Nielsen had unwittingly touched on when she had told Bryce that a cattleman could wear a good suit and live in town.

He would cut up XT, and Anchor too, keeping enough for a fair-sized ranch. The rest would be sold, so there would no longer be a barrier to the west or a block on the trail north to the railroad.

"There's a lot to do before we die," he told the blonde girl as she bent her face toward his.

Part of it would be bringing a new kind of law to Dalham County.

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1. How many of the following Western states raise cotton as well as cows: Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming, New Mexico, Texas, Idaho?

2. To what range hardware do the size numbers 00, 0, 1, and 2 apply?

3. Gruyer, gruya, gruyo, grulio all stem from the Spanish word *grullo* (GROOL-yo) and mean a horse of what color?

4. Of what Wyoming River do the cowboys say: "She's a mile wide, an inch deep, and rolls uphill all the way from Texas?"

5. Each of these Western place names includes the Spanish name of a tree. Full credit for translating two: (1) Encino, (2) Capulín, (3) Los Olmos, (4) Los Alamos, (5) Los Olivos, (6) Pinos Altos, (7) Sabina, (8) Los Robles, (9) Manzano, (10) Nogales, (11) Nueces.

6. What color should a horse's mane and tail be in order to qualify him as a true palomino?

7. Some call them panniers, some kyacks. What are they and of what various materials are they made?

8. What was it that old-time cowboys facetiously called brave maker, talky juice, gut warmer, snake oil, tornado juice, panther milk, coffin varnish and many other picturesque slang names?

9. Name the small, short-barreled pistol often carried as a hide-out gun by professional gamblers of the old West?

10. There is a National Forest named for the famous explorers Lewis and Clark, and one named for the Flathead Indian tribe, in what state?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 77. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

GUNFIGHTER'S WAY

By PAT PFEIFER

JOHNNY BLUE rode back into Bennetville and felt a curious relief that, outwardly at least, the town had changed so little. He had hoped it would be the same as when he'd ridden out, a scared, scrawny kid, for he wanted desperately to wipe the past three years from his life and take it up again as if he had never left.

RITA KNEW WHAT she wanted . . . and it didn't matter how many men had to die to satisfy her craving for excitement

Johnny smiled humorlessly now as he looked down his lanky body. Even if Bennetville had not changed, he had. He was coming back with good clothes, a horse that had cost too much, and a reputation as a gun-quick lawman that had also come high.

He passed the general store, the saloon, the small shack that served as a post office, and turned in at the livery stable. It was bigger now than it had been, and Johnny grinned as he thought of Pop Dunovan. The wiry old ex-cowpuncher deserved whatever success he had won.

Pop greeted him with profane and heartfelt fluency. "Come on in the back room, boy. I still have that bottle of good whiskey there."

In the harness room, Johnny Blue set his glass down and felt relaxation creep over him. The sensation was a strange one, for it had been a long time—ever since he'd killed Rance Luskin in a gunfight—that he had been able to loosen taut nerves and slacken his everlasting vigilance. The fact that he had arrested many men alive, before that day, meant nothing to the glory-seekers who wanted to cap Johnny's reputation by ending his life. The thought tightened his lips and hardened his features into a coldness that aged his youthful face.

Pop Dunovan was watching. He said, "You've changed, Johnny. It's not just the clothes. It shows in the way that gun of yours swings, with the butt at the handiest angle. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were more than twenty-two. You've learned too much too soon."

Johnny's grin was sardonic. "You called it, Pop. I came back to forget some of it. I'm going to buy into a business and forget there ever was a killer called Rance Luskin, or a deputy called Johnny Blue."

"What makes you think it'll be easier here?"

Surprise tinged Johnny's reply. "I grew up here. There are still plenty of folks around that I was friends with. I didn't know where else I could try."

"I can name you two men who'll try you out—maybe more. No, most folks haven't changed much, but you have. You want to be just an average citizen, but they know you're not. Johnny, already they're telling stories about you whenever gunfighting comes up. You're a stranger to these people now, and that's what counts—even if you don't feel like a stranger."

There was a finality that carried truth in his words, but Johnny Blue could not accept them. He wanted roots, a home, and a job that didn't require a gun.

"I hope you make it, boy," Pop said. "Now, if you want to stick around here this afternoon, Mother and Sheila'd love to have you for supper. So would I."

The afternoon went quickly, for Johnny Blue found he enjoyed feeding and caring for the horses. It wasn't a bad business. Some of the customers remembered him, and a few of the ones he had been friendly with thawed out into a semblance of their old relationship after a while.

Others acted uncomfortable, some acted distant, but all of them showed the feeling of constraint that Johnny had become used to since the Luskin shooting. He knew then what Pop had meant, but resolved that it would only be a matter of time until he was accepted here again. As long as he avoided gun trouble, his reputation would soon die.

He picked up the harness he'd pulled off a mare, and was hanging it up in the back room when he heard two horses come in. Pop met him at the door.

"These are the Peatry boys, Johnny. You don't know them, but they fancy they're tough. I'll handle them."

Johnny Blue followed Pop and leaned against a stall, watching the Peatrys. He'd seen them before—not the same faces, but the same swagger, the same fancy guns, the trouble-hungry shine in the eyes. More than one of their type had tasted the business end of a swinging gun barrel in Johnny's hands.

"Who's the new flunky, Pop?" There was a false note of friendliness in Bill Peatry's voice.

"Johnny Blue, meet Bill and Hank Peatry." There was no expression in Pop's voice.

"So the conquering hero's come home!" The derision in Hank's words was a deliberate irritant. "Did you run out of fresh meat out yonder?"

Johnny Blue clamped down on his temper. "I never made a steady diet of it, anyway, Peatry. Now I intend to settle down here."

Bill Peatry nodded thoughtfully. Though he was tinged with the same arrogance as his brother, his lack of bluster made him more dangerous. "As long as you tend to your business, we'll tend to ours. Just don't step on our toes, Blue. This isn't your town anymore."

Once again Johnny felt the pull of anger. "You stay off my toes too, Peatry. I'm not looking for trouble unless you want it."

Hank Peatry opened his mouth, but his

brother pulled him around. "Tell Rita I'll be out to take her to the dance Friday, Pop," he said over his shoulder. "So long, Blue. I'll see you again."

THE Dunovan place was two miles outside of town, and Blue would have known it instantly, for there were a number of sleek horses in the pasture bordering the house. He remembered Sheila Dunovan, a wild young hoyden who had shared her father's love of horses, when he saw a feminine figure sitting in the porch swing.

Then Johny Blue stopped with one foot on the step and stared at this girl with the blue-black hair and the breathtaking figure. He thought that Sheila had grown up with a vengeance, then realized he was wrong. Sheila's hair had been flaming red. The girl returned his look with a toss of her head and a half-smile on her full-lipped red mouth.

Pop Dunovan said, "This is Rita Schofield, my niece. She came to live with us after her folks died, a year ago."

Rita stood up and walked to the edge of the steps. She made even this simple act a provocatively feminine thing.

"Johnny Blue?" She repeated the name as if savoring it. "You don't look at all like a a famous deputy," she said huskily.

"He's not, any more." There was acidity in Pop's words, and Blue wondered why. "Where's Sheila?"

Disdain showed in Rita's shrug. "She rode out like an Indian on your new horse. Said she was trying him on for size."

"Well, we won't wait supper for her. Let's go in."

Supper passed in a pleasant haze for Johnny Blue. It had been too long since he'd eaten a meal among friends, and with a woman as exciting as Rita Schofield. She pressed questions on him about his past two years, her dark eyes gleaming with a vicarious excitement. Johnny, accustomed to encountering a certain aversion to his reputation on the part of some "decent" women, found himself talking more than he had in years.

They were finishing their pie when Sheila Dunovan came in. For an instant her attractiveness drew Johnny's attention from Rita. Her hair had darkened to a rich bronze, and there was a boyish vitality in her. Pop's daughter gave the impression of frankness, where Rita was aloofly inviting.

Sheila Dunovan stared at him, then at Rita. Her glance returned to Johnny and she nodded with cool contempt. "Don't bother to introduce me, Dad," she said frostily. "I've already heard about the great gunman from Bill Peatry."

Pop Dunovan snapped, "That's an uncalled for insult to a guest, Sheila. And you know better than to listen to what the Peatrys say."

Sheila nodded, a faint smile enhancing her quick apology. "I'm sorry, Mr. Blue. Bill told me about your squabble when he reminded me to tell Rita he'd take her to the dance Friday. He also said he'd like to shoot you out from under your reputation."

Johnny looked across at Rita, feeling a sudden hot jealousy. The girl's eyes flashed. "I've no date with Bill Peatry."

"That's not the way you acted the last time he was here."

Rita glared at the other girl. "You had no right to spy on me. I turned him down, but not the way you'd do it. A lady doesn't insult a man just because he shows his interest in her."

Sheila said. "As to the spying, you see over a lot of brush from a horse's back. No, I'm not your kind, Rita. But Bill's your problem, and I don't care how you say no to him."

Rita looked once more at Johnny Blue, and her lips parted in a smile that was invitation. "I've never been interested in Bill Peatry," she murmured. "And I have no date for the dance."

Sheila Dunovan scooped up a piece of pie. "It figures, now," she said, eyeing Johnny coldly. "You're bigger game. Oh, I'm sorry, Dad. Just to do penace I'll go clean the barn. See you around, gunslinger."

Later on, it was quiet and warm on the porch, and Johnny Blue felt the drum of his pulses as Rita Scofield came out alone and sat down beside him. He reached for her hand, and she did not withdraw it.

"It's funny," she said. "I've hated this town and all the smug little nobodys in it. I never thought a man like you would come along."

Johnny put his arm around her. "A man like what?"

Rita turned her mouth up to his, and her kiss was a defense-shattering thing. "A man who's bigger than all these ordinary, dull, and decent people who grub their lives away and never make any money. I want to be somebody, and belong to a man who's somebody."

Even in his preoccupation with her lush beauty, a faint warning made him say, "But that's what I'm going to be, Rita—just a plain, everyday citizen who doesn't even pack a gun. I'm going to buy a share in Pop's business if he'll have me."

Her body tensed. "That's crazy. You've made a reputation already. You can make money, big money, and get out into the world. You're not made to be a small-town nobody."

"But that's what I'm going to be." His voice was chill.

Rita drew back; then she smiled. "We'll see, Johnny." Then with a lithe twist of her body and one backward mocking smile, she was gone.

JOHNNY BLUE completed next morning; then he was a businessman. He shook Pop's hand. "Okay, partner. What do I do?"

Pop grinned. With the magnificent gesture of a king bestowing knighthood, he handed Johnny a shovel. "Your business awaits, bucko."

A shadow blotted out the sun streaming into the barn, as Sheila Dunovan came in. She gave Johnny a cool nod of greeting, and he felt an irritation at her continuing enmity, mixed with a desire to break through her dislike. She did not give him the chance.

"By the way, gunslinger, you can expect the Peatry boys any second. Rita drove me in her buggy, then went off on her own. She's probably ditching Bill right now, and he'll know it's you who's cutting in on his girl."

"Look, Sheila. I don't play around with another man's woman. You heard Rita last night."

"Sure, I heard her. Here comes Bill. Ask him what she's told him."

Occupied with his anger at Sheila's hints about Rita, Johnny went back to cleaning the stall nearest him. The Peatrys came in the door, and stopped a moment while their vision adjusted to the dim light, after the bright sun outside. Then Bill Peatry blocked the entrance to the stall.

"You've stepped on my toes, Blue."

Johnny felt his peaceful ambitions fading into the old rash anger. He worked methodically to overcome it. "That so?" he said evenly.

"Leave my girl alone. Think you can come back here and run over my rights, but it won't work. I'll kill you first."

Johnny raised his shovel, with its smelly burden, and took a step forward. He could not get past Peatry. "Move out of my way," he ordered.

"Move me."

Johnny responded instantly. His hands flicked the shovel forward, flinging the blob of manure against Peatry's chest. Involuntarily the man recoiled. Another flick of the shovel knocked his half-drawn gun out of his hand. Johnny drove past him and Peatry whirled, his face murderous.

He lunged, but Johnny Blue met the rush with a dropped shoulder that caught Peatry in the chest and slammed him back against a post. Peatry stood there, fighting for breath. Johnny, moving with the merciless efficiency that he had learned as a lawman, finished the fight with two driving blows to Peatry's chin. Then he stepped back and watched Hank Peatry struggling to get past Pop and Sheila Dunovan.

"Damn you, we'll get you for this, you girl-stealing bushwhacker," Hank said. He dragged Bill to his feet, slung his arm over his shoulder, and helped his brother out.

"You tell him, when he wakes up," Johnny said, his face utterly ruthless in that moment, "to say away from Rita."

"I'll tell him, Blue. But it won't make any difference, because Bill and I both figure to have you six feet underground by sundown."

He left then, awkwardly, because of his brother's weight, and Johnny Blue felt sick. He'd let his temper lure him into the old gun-trap, and now honor demanded that he meet the brothers. He didn't fear them, but he knew that if he killed them all his hopes of finding a new life here in Bennetville would

be gone. People would never accept as one of them a man who had killed twice.

He was jerked out of his thoughts as Rita burst through the door, her features alight with a strange excitement. "I saw the Peatrys come in. Did you fight over me?" There was almost an eagerness in the question.

Dunovan said curtly, "No, not much. Johnny took care of it."

"I didn't hear any shooting. He didn't kill them?"

"No."

Hearing this short answer, a look so fleeting that Johnny was not even sure he had seen it, crossed her face. Then he knew he must have been wrong, for it was a look of disappointment.

She moved close to him.

"I'm so glad," she said softly. "But I wouldn't have blamed you, Johnny. They've been horrible to me lately. I don't want anything to do with them, but—" She broke off with a helpless gesture.

"They won't bother you any more, Rita. I'll see to that."

Her eyes were soft and shining. "Thank you, Johnny. I don't care about them, or anyone else—not now."

Sheila Dunovan stayed after Rita left, working in the stalls. She climbed the side of one and perched on it as Johnny put straw on the floor.

"Well, looks as if you'll kill the Peatry's tonight, gunslinger."

Johny stared up at her, his face going cold, and said harshly, "Shut up with that talk, girl. I wouldn't take it from a man, and I've taken it long enough from you."

She met his hard gaze for a moment, then looked away. "Now I believe what I've heard about you," she said, and then looked at him again. "I'm really sorry, this time. Maybe you'll believe that, and answer one question. I promise I'll believe your answer."

"Go ahead." There was anger in the short assent.

"What did you come back here for?" Sheila asked.

Johnny sighed wearily. "I want to settle down, put this gun away, and live a normal life. I want to get married, have kids, and make everyone forget I ever killed a man."

SHEILA stared at him, then nodded in sudden decision. "I believe you, so much that I'm going to ruin any respect you may have for me by telling you what Rita is up to." She cut off his reply with a sharp motion of one hand.

"Forget that I'm a woman and maybe you won't think I'm trying to get even with her. Rita is—beautiful. If she lived in a big town she'd be someone important, or belong to someone who's wealthy or famous. But there's no one here to give her the excitement she wants, only men like the Peatrys, who live wild and make enough shady money to satisfy her. So she settled for the attention being Bill Peatry's girl got her, until you came along."

"Are you through?"

"Not yet. She *wants* you to meet Bill Peatry because, no matter who wins the fight, she gets what she wants. And she wants to get out of this town. If you kill Bill you'll never make it here, and you'll be indebted to her for going away with you, leaving everything behind. She'll be a notorious gunman's woman, and she'll like it. If Bill wins, he'll figure this town's too small for him, and that by killing you he can draw down gunman's wages anywhere. She knows how to handle him as well as she does any other man." Sheila paused, then added, "I'm through now."

She ran out, and Johnny watched her go. He had known enough of women to realize she at least thought she was telling the truth. Even if she were mistaken, he saw with a sudden cold clarity that Rita had, at least accidentally, been the cause of a situation that might cost him his life.

Pop and Johnny went to the hotel to eat their noon meal, and the town marshal came to their table. Marshal Topkins was not friendly.

"It didn't take you long to drum up a gunfight," he said disapprovingly.

Pop Dunovan said testily, "He was pushed into it. If it were me in the fight, you wouldn't be talking this way."

The marshal scowled, "You aren't a gunfighter, Pop. There's a difference between an ordinary man who gets crowded into a fight, and a man who goes out to meet it. Blue, if you down the Peatrys you'll have to leave town."

Johnny Blue said coldly, "Do you think I can crawl out of it?"

Tompkins shook his head. "No, but what I said still stands."

He looked out the door, then nodded. "Here they come."

A cold wind swept all anger, all misgivings from Johnny. He had no feelings left, only the fatalism that had enabled him to meet other men in other gun battles.

"Stay inside, Pop," he said gently, and pushed the man back as he stepped out on the porch.

The sunshine striking the water in the hotel watering trough was a violent thing. He looked away to clear his vision, and saw the Peatrys standing across the street, their shadows reaching before them.

Then the tension of the moment was shattered as Rita Scofield hurried down the street and climbed the porch steps, followed by Sheila Dunovan. There was a jarring note in their appearance at this time.

Johnny said stridently, "Get the hell out of here."

"No."

It was Rita's voice, and he saw again that strange excitement and something more, a greed of spirit that fed on evil in men and made her beauty a degrading thing. He turned from her with almost a feeling of disgust, knowing now that Shelia had told the truth.

"Johnny," Sheila said, her voice thin with fear, "Don't meet them like this, not two of them. It isn't fair."

Rita's voice was a direct contrast, sharp, bold, and confident. "Don't be a fool, Sheila. Of course he'll stand up to them. There's no other way."

Johnny Blue watched the Peatrys, now stepping down from the boardwalk as one man, and thought that there *was* no other way as far as Rita was concerned. To use shelter, such as that trough in front of him, in order to even the odds, would be the cautious thing to do. No man in town would blame him. But to have Rita he would have to play it the gunman's way, facing them both down in order to give her the vicarious glory she craved.

Then he was diving down the steps. He took the impact of the fall on his shoulder as he rolled behind the trough. His .44 was out and lining on Bill Peatry before the brothers fully comprehended what had happened. They opened fire, and the bullets thudded into the trough. Johnny stood up suddenly. His first shots struck home; Bill Peatry staggered and went down.

Now the odds were even. Johnny came around the end of the trough to face Hank Peatry. But there was no need, for Hank had dropped his gun and was bending over his brother, everything else forgotten. Johnny approached them warily. Then the coldness that was freezing his emotions retreated. Bill Peatry was sitting up, sick with the pain of his smashed shoulder, but alive.

JOHNNY heard screaming behind him, but did not realize it was Rita until she pulled him around and pummeled him with her fists, cursing him for a coward and a fool. He shoved her away, his face taut with aversion. Even in the midst of her rage, she knew what his expression signified. A look of cunning mingled with her wild anger. She spun around and ran to the Peatrys, helping Bill to his feet, talking to him vehemently. An unemotional sort of curiosity sent Johnny forward.

"He made trouble between us, Bill," Rita was saying. "It was all his fault. You can still get him; I'll help you."

She bent and fumbled in the dust, and when she straightened Johnny saw she held Bill Peatry's gun. She pressed it into Peatry's limp hand and then backed away, and there was a vindictive satisfaction in the stare she turned on Johnny. Bill Peatry looked down at the gun, then at Johnny. The gun seemed to shock him out of his daze.

"You she-devil," he said wonderingly. "You'd like a killing!"

He turned suddenly and lashed out at her with a fist, and Rita fell to the street. Peatry looked down at her and she cowered away, whimpering in fear. Then he turned his back and walked away, stopping in front of Johnny.

"I don't have a quarrel with you, any more." Without another backward look, Bill Peatry left, followed by his brother.

Now the curious ventured out of doorways and, strangely enough, there was little interest in Johnny Blue. Instead of a battle to the death, they had witnessed a minor quarrel. And instead of seeing a gunfighter blast his enemies down, they had seen Johnny Blue meet them with the caution an ordinary man would have used, without any grandstand glory. But they could not dismiss the part Rita Scofield had played, nor the ugly side of her character her rage had tricked her into revealing.

She stood searching from one face to another, and it was as if she could not stand to have all her inner schemings revealed to these people she had lived with, or face the contempt of those she had despised. She broke and ran blindly into the shelter of the hotel.

Now the spell of unreality that had gripped Johny Blue left, and he turned to Pop Dunovan. "Rita won't want to stay here any more, Pop. It doesn't make any difference to me whether she goes or stays, but if she wants to leave, will our business stand the price of a train ticket?"

"I'll go talk to her. I think she'll want to visit her Dad's folks down south."

Johnny nodded and turned away, looking for Sheila Dunovan. He found her getting ready to leave the livery stable, and took hold of her horse's bridle. He looked into her eyes and marveled at the depths he saw there, knowing there was no mystery in her that had to be hidden, but a wealth that was worth waiting for.

"I'm sorry about Rita," she said softly.

"I'm sorry for her sake, but not for mine. You told me once to forget you're a woman. I won't ever be able to."

He reached out for her, and she came willingly. Later, she leaned back in his arms and said, "I'm glad you won't forget."

Johny gave the sigh of a man at peace with himself and his world. "Come on then, woman. We have a business to run."

THE SAGA OF WHISKEYTOWN

THE old '49ers are no doubt turning over in their graves about it, but it appears as if Whiskeytown may get itself a chaser—to end all chasers. It looks as if the whole town is going to be inundated—and by water, yet! Of course, it's all in the name of progress. It has to do with a flood-control-and-power dam, part of the Trinity River project in northern California. But for it to happen to Whiskeytown!

Time was when the town, during the roaring goldrush days of a century or so ago now, was a lusty, thriving community. But that isn't the only reason for this being such a sad piece of news. You see, if any town had a right to be called Whiskeytown, it was this one. It was right at this spot that a keg of whiskey, tied to a prospector's mule, got loose and went rolling away.

Recognizing a fortuitous omen when they saw one, the citizens of the area promptly decided to call the place Whiskeytown. But the Post Office Department in Washington, being somewhat on the stodgy side, considered this too undignified to be a mailing address. The community finally had to settle for another name—Blair. Nobody was happy about it, but the town had to be given some kind of name.

Well, the years went by. The town lost its boom aspects and settled down to being just a plain everyday community. But still nobody was particularly happy about its name. After a while the name was changed to Stella. This didn't seem to make anybody feel like doing handsprings either, though. The name was changed to Schilling. This also was not greeted by any dancing in the street.

It just seemed to be, after all these decades, in people's blood—the idea of calling their community Whiskeytown. Finally, after more than a century, something like one hundred and three years, to be exact, the Post Office Department and the Department of the Interior relented. On July 1, 1952, they allowed the community to adopt the name of Whiskeytown.

And now, only a short three years later, the Bureau of Reclamation is preparing plans to dilute the whole area with water. Some 150 citizens have signed a petition protesting this fate, but the indications are that, within a year or so, Whiskeytown may be just so much water.

It does seem a dam shame.

——*Harold Helfer*

Double Take

by TESS TRAHERN

SAM THOUGHT DOLLY WAS the friendliest girl he had ever met . . . till he learned that her kisses were fingering him for death

SAM RUSSELL figured he was sure going to like the town of Empty Boot, the first time he rode down the main drag. He'd never seen people so friendly to a stranger. Not that many people were about. Empty Boot wasn't much more than a crossroads, and it was a steaming hot afternoon, fine for a siesta. But the few folks he encountered seemed to take remarkably kindly to him.

"Howdy, bud," said a loafer by the Road to Ruin Saloon.

"Howdy," said Sam, riding easily on.

A paunchy man was taking his ease under a makeshift awning in front of the general store. "Well, bud," he said, raising his hand an inch or two in greeting, "it's nice to see you in town. Going to be here long?"

"Can't say," replied Sam.

He was not a man given to examining apparently friendly motives, and so even after a few more people had spoken to him in the same familiar way, he didn't wonder about it much. He only thought that Empty Boot was a town where he felt at home mighty fast.

He decided to stop at the livery barn to give Righto, his rangy buckskin, a feed and a few hours' rest, and also to inquire the way to the Bentbow spread, where he was going to be heading when the day got a little cooler. In the dark interior near the doorway, a scrawny old man sat dozing, unmindful of the flies buzzing around his scraggly whiskers, his peg-leg stretched straight out.

When Sam dismounted and led Righto into the stable, the liveryman snorted awake and peered sleepily around. He looked startled at the sight of Sam, and rubbed his eyes.

"Bag of oats for my horse, please," said Sam.

The old man peered curiously at him, then got up and hopped nimbly to take the reins. "I've never seen this critter before," he said, still staring at Sam.

"I should think not," answered Sam. "I'll be back to pick him up after I get some grub myself. I'm heading out to Bentbow."

"Naturally," agreed Peg-Leg. "It's smart of you to wait till the heat of the day's over, bud. Are they expecting you today?"

"I can't say for sure," replied Sam, and headed for a lunchroom he'd seen down the street.

This sure is a friendly town, he was thinking, and his mind wandered back to the incident that had brought him through Empty Boot, on his way to Bentbow. He figured he was lucky the fellow had steered him here.

Sam Russell was a student in a veterinary college, and he was spending his summer vacation in the saddle, riding more or less aimlessly from ranch to ranch, looking for sick animals to doctor, turning an honest dollar and gaining a lot of experience. Just a week ago he'd drifted into another cowtown, High Creek. He was thirsty after a hot dusty day in the saddle, and he headed for the saloon.

The place was comfortably full, and yet while he stood at the bar sipping his beer, he felt that someone in the crowd was staring at him. He caught the eye of a short, dark, mustached man who, though he was dressed in cowboy clothes, was far from saddle lean. Sam didn't like his looks, and was glad when the stranger glanced away. But a moment later he made his way over to Sam's side.

"Have one on me," he said.

"Thanks," said Sam, "but I've had two beers. That's enough."

"I just wanted to talk to you."

"Talk, if you want to," Sam answered. "I can listen without beer."

The man signaled the bartender for whisky for himself. "My name's McDonald. I'm ramrod at the Bentbow spread, about seventy-five miles from here, near Empty Boot. We're looking for hands."

"Help must be scarce for you to come this far looking for it."

"Oh, I get over here a lot. My—my mother lives here."

Sam let that pass, though he couldn't picture McDonald at his mother's knee.

"I noticed you right off," McDonald continued affably. "I thought maybe you might be looking for a punching job."

"Well, no," said Sam. "Unless you need the services of a veterinary, I wouldn't be interested."

"Well, if this isn't my lucky day," McDonald said. "Sick horses are just what we do have. There are three that won't eat. What do you reckon that could be?"

"There's no telling," said Sam. "I'd have to see them."

"Just you go to Bentbow," urged McDonald. "You'll be well paid. Now you go over to the table and I'll bring you a beer, and we'll seal the bargain."

Sam figured three beers wouldn't put him under the table. Besides, the proposition sounded interesting.

AS HE reached the door of the lunchroom in Empty Boot, nearly a week later, Sam had about decided that McDonald was on the level. It was funny how eager he'd been to get Sam to come to Bentbow. So Sam had stubbornly taken his time traveling. But now that he was here everything seemed all right. Of course he hadn't seen the ranch yet, but it seemed to be well-

known, and the town sure was pleasant. Never had he seen friendly people like these. He smiled at a fellow up the street who waved to him. Pretty soon he'd be answering to the name of "Bud" for sure.

Like an audible echo to his thought, he heard a shout behind him. "Bud! *Bud,* wait for me!"

Startled, he turned to see a small figure in levis, red shirt, and white kerchief, sprinting down the boardwalk. She didn't let up her pace even when he stopped. Panting, and obviously too breathless to speak, she hurtled right up to him and threw her arms around his neck.

"Whoa!" Sam gasped. He stood there with a firmly curved, slightly damp, one hundred pounds of girl hanging onto him, and he thought, the ladies in these parts are even friendlier than the men. There must be more to this than just making strangers feel at home.

The girl caught her breath, but she didn't relinquish her hold on his neck. "It's wonderful to see you! Where in the world have you been?"

"Here and there, ma'am," anwered Sam politely. "And I'm sure proud to meet you, too."

Abruptly she released his windpipe and backed away a step. "Meet me? *Ma'am?"* Then she laughed and mimicked his formal manner. "Nice to make *your* acquaintance, sir."

Linking her arm through his, she pulled him back toward the livery stable at a much faster pace than he wanted to go. Her words came even faster.

"You have to go to Bentbow right away. Evan's been terrible, and I've been worried sick. I was going to leave today, because Ma Brady packed up this morning and I couldn't stay out there with Evan alone. But it'll be all right now. For goodness sake, tell me where you've been."

Sam had a dizzy feeling that nothing he could possibly say would make any sense. He allowed himself to be propelled along the sidewalk. After all, he was heading for Bentbow anyway, and if she was in such an all-fired hurry to get him there, he might as well oblige the lady.

"The last real town I was in," he said cautiously, "was High Creek."

"What were you doing there?"

"Passing through."

Her eyes were blue, and they were round with puzzlement. She was certainly a pretty girl, Sam thought. He wished she were a mite more sensible. They had reached the stable by that time, and she said nothing while she helped Peg-Leg saddle her horse, as Sam saddled Righto.

All the enthusiasm she'd shown for Sam seemed to vanish as they rode out of town. The street dwindled rapidly to a pair of narrow wagon tracks, occasionally shaded by cottonwoods and casually following the course of an almost dry brook.

"Nice of you to show me the way," said Sam, after several minutes of silence.

"Show *you* the way!" she repeated, astonished. She pulled rein, and when he had stopped too, she said, "Now look here, bud, why are you acting so funny?"

"Since you've brought it up," replied Sam, "I'll ask the same question of you. I've been wanting to ever since you greeted me in such a friendly way, but I didn't know how you'd take it."

"But, bud, what's so funny about—"

"Ma'am," Sam interrupted, "you can call me anything you've a mind to, but my real name is Sam Russell."

Her eyes widened. "Oh my goodness! It's the sun. Come over under this cottonwood and lie down. I'll see if there's any water in the darned creek." She leaped from her pony and scrambled through the bushes to the little stream.

Something told Sam to hurry back through Empty Boot and not stop till he was a long way the other side of it. Then he thought of those round blue eyes and the taffy brown curls that had brushed his cheek as she'd clung to him on the sidewalk. He sighed, dismounted, and lay down in the shade of the cottonwood. A minute later she was back at his side. "The water's a little muddy," she said, wringing out her handkerchief, "but it's cool." She placed it on his forehead.

"It's nice of you to do this, ma'am," said Sam, "but I don't think I'm any more sunstruck than you are."

"Oh, dear," she moaned. "Now look. Honest to goodness, cross your heart, don't you know me? Me, Dolly Johnson?"

"Nope," said Sam, holding out his hand, "but I'd sure like to, Miss Johnson."

"*Dolly,* Bud," she said. "I'm Dolly."

"What do you say we make a bargain? I'll be glad to call you Dolly, but you'll have to call me Sam."

SHE sat down cross-legged and stared at him. "Gosh, what do I do now?"

"Try this on your own forehead," said Sam, offering her the handkerchief. "I don't see what the problem is. I'm heading for Bentbow because I was offered a job there, and if you're heading that way I'd be pleased to have your company."

"Wait a minute. Just tell me, did you ever hear of Bud—I mean Robert—Reynolds?"

"Sure. He's the rancher I aim to get this job from. See, we're making sense."

Dolly shook her head sadly. "No we're not. You just said you were going to get a job from yourself."

Sam digested this remark for a moment. "You mean you think I'm this Robert Reynolds. What did you call him first—Bud?"

"Everybody calls you Bud."

"They sure do," agreed Sam. "Well, that explains why Empty Boot was so friendly. Do I really look like Reynolds?"

"You're the spitting image." She stared at him. "Red hair with a curl in it, gray eyes, kind of freckled face—" As she looked, though, doubt crept into her eyes. "Roll up your left sleeve." When his upper arm was exposed, she pointed to a long scratch. "Where'd you get that?"

Sam looked sheepish. "To tell you the truth, Dolly, I don't know. I just noticed it the other morning when I woke up."

"I'll tell you where you got it. You were riding Thunderbird last Wednesday, and he pitched you into some barbed wire. I was there."

Sam shook his head. "Last Wednesday I was two counties away from here." He sighed. "We're not getting anywhere. What do you say we go through with our plan as scheduled and head for Bentbow?"

Dolly sat there, thinking. Finally she shook her head. "We'd better not do anything except get out of sight until I figure this out. Look, do you trust me?"

"Well, I think you're kind of confused, but I guess you don't mean any harm."

Dolly leaned toward him earnestly. "Even if you think I'm crazy, will you do me a favor? Believe me, it would be awful if you went to Bentbow, if Evan is behind this—whether you're Bud or whether you're really Sam Russell. We've got to get off this trail pronto. Somebody might come along, and we'd better not be seen together."

She pulled him to his feet and half dragged, half pushed him to his horse. Sam was convinced she was loco, but the earnest anxiety in her face was so appealing that he just had to go along with her. When they were mounted she turned her pony toward the stream. Sam's horse followed, and they splashed over the muddy bottom and picked their way through the dense undergrowth on the other side.

Dolly guided them over rocky terrain, angling away from the brook toward a hilly wooded area a few miles off. They rode at as fast a pace as the rough going would allow, until they came to the edge of a pasture where there was no cover.

"We could go around," said Dolly, "but it'll be easier and quicker to cross it. I'll just ride out a way and see if it's all clear. You wait till I wave."

She galloped toward the middle of the area, looking carefully around. Just as she turned to beckon to him, Sam heard the whine of a rifle. Dolly seemed to duck as her horse reared violently. Her feet kicked free of the stirrups; she clutched hard for the pommel, and then fell headlong to the ground.

Sam, watching, saw her lying still. His leg muscles tightened with the effort to keep his heels from Righto's flanks and send the horse plunging into the open. However, caution warned him that another body lying alongside Dolly's wouldn't help her any. He pulled his rifle out of the saddle boot and forced himself to wait, to see if the drygulcher would investigate his work at closer range.

The shot had seemed to come from slightly higher ground a hundred yards or so to his left, around the circle of brushy land. After

Dolly stared at the newcomer, and opened her mouth to scream. . . .

an agonizing period of total silence, Sam rode slowly in the other direction. When he'd reached a point roughly opposite where the bushwhacker had been, he waited again. He thought he saw movement in the foliage across the clearing, but soon everything was still.

Sam dismounted and, carrying his rifle, began to crawl toward where Dolly lay. There was no shot, no sound, and his impatience got the better of him. Keeping as low as he could, he ran toward her.

Probably only her sudden turn back toward

Sam had saved her, he thought—or else the bushwhacker was a very poor shot. Apparently the bullet hadn't hit her, but had merely frightened her horse. When she fell she had hit her head on a sharp stone; that was what had knocked her out. The bloody bruise on her temple might be serious. He picked her up and ran again, zigzagging a little, back to his horse.

The drygulcher evidently had considered his mission accomplished, for the quiet remained undisturbed. He reached a sheltered spot and laid her down. Rummaging around in his saddlebag, Sam found a clean handkerchief. He bathed the wound with water from his canteen, and bound the cloth around her head. In less grim circumstances, he might have smiled at her comic appearance. The bandage covered most of one eye, and its knotted ends poked rakishly up through her curls.

Sam, however, was not amused. He looked at her limp form, remembering how warmly it had pressed against his chest an hour ago, how tightly her arms had wound around his neck.

He had no idea what to do. She needed a doctor; but, more than anything else, she had not wanted him to be seen with her. They would hardly be inconspicious if he rode into town with her across the saddle.

DOLLY moaned. Slowly she opened her eyes. "Ouch," she whispered. "What did you do to me, Bud?"

"It wasn't me—I mean, not Sam," replied Sam. "Oh, Dolly, not me! Some dirty yellow—" he swallowed fast—"took a shot at you."

She smiled weakly. "Now I remember. It couldn't have been you. I was waving at you, and you weren't shooting."

"We have to get you to a doctor."

"No, not now." She sat up, leaning on one elbow, and gasped. "Gosh, I was dizzy for a minute. Listen, that shot should prove to you that I was right."

"Maybe so, but I don't know about what," replied Sam. "All I know is I seem to be causing considerable ruckus, and I'd sure like to be someplace where it's calmer."

"That's right," agreed Dolly. "We've got to get out of sight until we can figure out what's going on. I was taking you to an old prospector's cabin up at the top of that hill ahead."

Sam hesitated. The idea of an old prospector's cabin was fine with him, but he'd have preferred one about twenty miles away. It struck him as unfair that just because he looked like a guy who seemed to have a handful of trouble, he got a handful himself. But when he saw the pleading in Dolly's one eye that showed under the bandage, he gave up thinking of leaving.

Dolly was sitting up straight, holding onto Sam's arm. "Where's my mare? She wouldn't have gone far." The girl whistled.

"Dolly, you can't ride!"

"I can too." Dolly pointed at her mare, which was now coming almost anxiously toward them.

With Sam's help, Dolly got to her feet and mounted unsteadily. Sam rode beside her, one hand on her shoulder to steady her.

"I guess we'd better take the long way around," she said ruefully.

"We sure better. And let's get started on figuring what we're going to do. Why are you so upset because I look like Bud Reynolds?"

"He's disappeared," answered Dolly. "Last week Bud went off one morning to round up some strays. Nobody's seen him since."

Sam pushed back his Stetson and scratched his head. "A lot of people thought they saw him today."

"Including me," said Dolly. "I think Bud's cousin, Evan Ames, must be behind all this. He's lived at the ranch since he was twelve. His mother died, and his father just dumped him at Bentbow. Bud's father, old Josh Reynolds, tried to bring up both boys exactly the same. Bud's mother was dead, too. But Evan was an awful bully. He's a year older than Bud, and he used to tease him, torment him, and even beat him up.

"He's still at the ranch?"

Dolly nodded. "He was away in prison for a few years. He'd stolen money and horses from Josh, but Josh always forgave him. There wasn't any forgiving, though, when he got mixed up in a bank holdup. But even then Josh wouldn't give up on Evan. When he died, he made Bud promise to give Evan another chance when he got out."

As Dolly talked, they had been climbing steadily, and now Sam could see a ramshackle building, perched precariously on the summit of the hill. He tethered the horses and carried Dolly inside. The one room was damp and musty. It held a table, a rickety chair, and a cot. Sam brought in his saddle blanket and smoother it on the cot. Dolly lay down on it gratefully.

"We ought to get on with the story," said Sam. "I still don't see where I fit in—or where you do, either."

"Oh, I just come here summers."

"Are you a cousin too?" asked Sam.

"No, just an old friend. I'm a school teacher, and Josh used to invite me to spend my summers here. After he died, well—Bud invited me this year. But it's been no fun. Evan has been spoiling everything. He drinks, and lately, since Bud's been gone, he acts as if he owns the place and everything on it—including me. Well, there's no point in going into that."

Sam clenched his fists. "I'd like to go into it sometime—with Evan. And you think he has something to do with my turning up here?"

"Well, couldn't he have given you something—dope or something—to make you think you're not Bud? That you're somebody named Sam Russell?"

In spite of himself, Sam laughed. "That would be a mighty potent drink, Dolly. No, I can remember being Sam Russell last week, last year, in fact pretty nearly twenty-five years back."

"Who are you besides? I mean, what do you do?"

SAM told her about his veterinary studies and his summertime travels, and about his meeting McDonald in High Creek.

"McDonald!" Dolly exclaimed. "He's one of the shady characters who've been turning up at Bentbow lately."

"He told me about some sick horses, so the next day I headed for Empty Boot."

"But what about that scratch on your arm?" asked Dolly. "Everybody knew Bud had one right there."

"I think," said Sam slowly, "that the morning I found it was after I'd met McDonald. After the beer with him I was terribly tired—maybe too tired. I went to bed in the hotel, and I noticed the scratch when I woke up."

Dolly was excited. "McDonald drugged you with something in your beer, and then made the scratch while you were asleep. He was working for Evan, of course. If you were going to take Bud's place, they'd have to be sure Bud wouldn't turn up, wouldn't they? He—he must be—"

She huddled on the cot, tears forcing themselves between her lashes.

Sam patted her shoulder awkwardly. "We still don't know the reason for my being here. If Evan has killed Bud, why would he want another Bud around? Unless—wait a minute! You thought I was crazy."

"Anybody around here would have."

Sam nodded. "If Bud just disappeared, Evan would be suspected. But if people think I'm Bud, nobody's going to go around looking for a body."

"But you'd catch on eventually."

"Evan would find a chance to kill me too, after everybody in town thought I was crazy." Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "I've got it! I'm violently insane. I took a shot at you."

Dolly stared at him, light dawning in her eyes. Then her glance shifted, and she opened her mouth to scream.

"Evan!" she whispered instead.

"Put 'em up, Bud," said Evan.

Sam whirled to face a tall man, magnificently built, handsome, yet with cruelty etched around his eyes and evil pulling back the corners of his mouth.

For a few minutes all three of them were still. Evan and Sam took each other's measure, their eyes straining in the fading afternoon light. The silence was heavy; it filled the small room and seemed to drive away the last rays of the sun.

"Evan," Dolly repeated, louder, "I've found Bud."

Evan held his sixgun steady, and went on with the act. "Poor kid," he said, "caged up here with a maniac. You've been through a lot." He raised his gun a trifle and took a step toward Sam.

As Dolly screamed, Sam caught the toe of his boot on the table leg, heaved himself across the top, and dove, table and all, at Evan's

stomach. Just as Sam got a grip around his waist, the table collapsed. Evan went down, with Sam and the table on top of him.

But Evan held onto the gun with one hand, and heaved the table top up with the other. It acted like a lever, and Sam lost his balance. Evan raised the gun and brought it down hard on Sam's head. Sam heard another scream and the sound of a scuffle, but it seemed too far away for him to do anything about it.

Then he felt himself being lifted, and the cot was under him. There was something rough in his mouth, and tight bands on his hands and feet. He could see a little under his eyelids, and he could hear Evan's voice.

"There," Evan growled, giving a tightening yank to the rope that bound Sam's feet, "that ought to hold him." He turned to Dolly, who had collapsed on the chair. "Now I'll take care of you." He stood in front of her, his feet wide apart, his hands on his hips, and an insolent gleam in his black eyes.

"But why, Evan?" asked Dolly quietly.

His eyes narrowed, and he shook his head, still smiling. "Don't give me that. You know too much. You're scared."

"Of course I'm scared," said Dolly earnestly, "of *him*. He tried to shoot me. Evan, he must have gone crazy."

"Yeah," answered Evan, still suspicious. "He's crazy, all right."

"He seemed so strange," Dolly went on, "that I almost thought it was somebody else. And then I saw that scratch on his arm." She pointed to Sam's torn sleeve. "You remember when Bud did that, riding Thunderbird."

Evan glanced at the scratch, then back to Dolly. "Okay, let's go back to the ranch. I'll send someone for him."

They went outside. Evan put his sixgun back in the holster and picked up Sam's rifle. He caught all three horses, and Dolly and he rode off, with Righto being led behind. Sam heard them leave, and then he passed out completely.

WHEN he opened his eyes again, everything was just as black as when they were closed. He moaned, and tried unsuccessfully to bring his hand up to investigate that tight rough feeling in his mouth. Slowly he realized that he was tied down and gagged, and then he remembered all that had happened.

When he tried to roll over, he discovered that he was bound very tightly. He could lift his head a little, and that was all. But by the time a slight grayish tinge began to creep into the blackness, he chewed through the gag. He chafed his wrists raw, too, but could not ease the tightness of the rope around them.

Suddenly he became aware of a crackling noise outside. It was too slow and sustained to be footsteps; it was more like something large, dragging heavily, steadily, toward the shack. The sounds would stop for a few seconds and then resume, always louder, always closer. The suspense was so unendurable to Sam that he was about to shout, when the crackling stopped. There was a final thud against the door, which creaked slowly ajar.

Sam turned his head as far as he could, and saw a motionless heap on the floor. It was still too dark for him to tell whether the thing was alive. And then he heard its breath, harsh, rasping, desperate with effort, and knew it was a man.

The hairs prickling on his neck, Sam whispered, "Who are you?"

There was a moan, and a dirty, matted head rose in the grayness. "I'm Bud Reynolds. Help—me."

Sam didn't stop to wonder or to question. "I'll help you, but you have to help me first," he said clearly, insistently. "I'm tied down to this cot. If you can get me loose, I'll help you."

It was light enough now for Sam to see Bud's face, bruised and swollen and covered with a week's growth of beard, the eyes staring uncomprehendingly at him.

"Find something to cut my hands free," repeated Sam distinctly, but almost hopelessly, because it seemed impossible that Bud Reynolds could move from where he lay, or that he could understand anything that was said to him.

Slowly, painfuly, Bud reached into the pocket of his blue jeans and dragged out a closed jackknife. He tried to open it with his left hand, and then raised it to his mouth and pulled the blade free with his teeth. Then, leaning on his left elbow, he inched his way

across the floor, through the debris from the broken table.

When he reached the cot, Sam held his wrists down as far as he could, tensing his arms so he coulld pull away if Bud's shaky hand brought the knife down on his flesh. Leaning against the cot, grunting with effort, Bud managed to get the knife against the rope and then to saw at it, like a weak child. At last the blade cut through. The knife clattered to the floor, and Bud collapsed.

Sam reached for the knife and freed his feet. Then he lifted Bud gently and laid him on the cot, and sat down beside him, rubbing his own numb muscles. As soon as he could walk, he went outside and found his saddlebags, wishing he were the type who carried a sixgun stashed away there. With water from his canteen, he washed Bud's face and the deep scratches on his body.

All the time he had the strangest feeling that he was bathing himself, except that he couldn't feel it. Dolly hadn't been kidding—Bud and he were ringers for each other, all right. Of course, Bud's face was swollen and discolored from the beating he'd taken, and the beard covered up a lot, but basically the features were so much the same that Sam's face hurt when he looked at Bud's bruises.

But he realized that speculation about their resemblance was not as important as consideration of the spot they were in. Sam knew they had to get out of that cabin fast. Evan might already be on his way back. And if he found Bud alive, it wouldn't be for long. For Evan's plan to work, Bud had to be dead and Sam had to be alive—violently insane, but alive.

Sam couldn't see how he could get away very far, without a horse, carrying an unconscious man who shouldn't be moved anyway. If he only had a gun, he could stay right there and surprise Evan. It sure would be a surprise, at that, for him to see both Sam and Bud together.

Suddenly Sam's eyes narrowed with an idea. He looked in his saddlebag for razor and soap. As gently as he could, he shaved off Bud's stubble. He pulled off Bud's ragged shirt and pants and exchanged them for his own clothing. He patched up the ropes that had been used on him, and tied Bud to the cot. The gag that had been in his mouth was a chewed pulp, so Sam left it near Bud's mouth, as though Bud had chewed it. Then he left as fast as possible, making for the woods.

It was a hell of a chance he was taking, he knew. But as long as Evan thought that Bud was Sam, Bud would be safe. The main thing was getting Dolly out of danger. Sam had to leave Bud to take his own chances. He made his way down the hillside, toward the trail to Bentbow. He had to move slowly, keeping under cover all the time, for fear of meeting Evan.

Just as he was circling the pasture, he saw Evan cutting across it. He was riding a magnificent black horse, and was followed by another man who was bouncing along in a buckboard. Sam's fingers itched for a rifle. He watched Evan and his companion until they were out of sight, and then began to run toward the brookside trail.

When he reached it, he flopped down to rest. Then he heard the slow plodding of hoofs along the trail, and the squeak of wagon wheels. He stood up cautiously, and saw an old man with a scraggly beard, sitting in a wagon, driving an old gray horse.

SAM recognized the peg-legged liveryman. He's probably heard by this time that Bud Reynolds is crazy, thought Sam. He may run at the sight of me, but I have to risk it.

"Hello," he hailed.

Slowly the wagon came to a stop, and Sam ran alongside.

"Well, now," said the old man calmly, "you might be Bud Reynolds, who's off his head."

"Yes," said Sam. "I mean, I'm not crazy, and I'd like a lift toward Bentbow."

"Hop in."

"Thanks," said Sam jumping up to the seat.

"You don't know me, do you?" inquired Peg-Leg, clucking at his horse.

"Oh, sure," said Sam heartily. "Sure I do."

"I'd think you'd say, 'Hello, Uncle Alf,' if you knew me. I thought so yesterday at the stable."

"Well, Uncle Alf," said Sam lamely, "I've had a lot on my mind."

"You have now," the old man replied, "but you didn't yesterday. You've found out a

lot of things since then. You might even have run into a fellow I pulled out of a mine shaft a couple days ago, when I was out hunting. He crawled away before I could bring my wagon around to get him."

"You found Bud!" Sam exclaimed.

Uncle Alf slapped the reins, and the old horse broke into a ponderous trot. "Lots of strange things been happening," said Uncle Alf dreamily. "It seems as if they might just be in the mind of an old man. You look down a mine shaft and see something clinging to an old board. You get out your rope and go down there, and you drag out a fellow you've known since he was a tyke. Then you go off for your horse and wagon, so you can take him to a doctor, and when you come back he's gone. The next day you see this same fellow riding into town on a strange horse, and he doesn't even say howdy."

They'd come in sight of a turn of the road, blocked by a gate which had a curved bow burnt into the wood. Uncle Alf got down to open it and said, "Why don't you kind of get down under that blanket in the back? You wouldn't want to frighten people around here who think you're crazy."

As Sam was climbing over the seat, he asked, "Is Dolly here?"

"I hear she was shot by a crazy man yesterday," Uncle Alf said as he drove through the gate. "She's in her bedroom, too sick to be moved, they say."

Apparently they had come close to the ranch buildings, for the old man said no more until he'd driven behind a big barn.

"You can come out now. Nobody's around; even the cowpokes are gone from this spread. Just walk down that row of cottonwoods, and you'll come to Dolly's bedroom window. It's on the ground floor, on the corner." He clucked to his horse and swung his wagon around. Then he called over his shoulder, "See you later, Sam Russell."

Sam was halfway to the house before Uncle Alf's farewell registered. He was beginning to think *someone* must be crazy. The conversation with Uncle Alf had been so strange that Sam almost expected—as he had often hoped during the last twelve hours—that he would wake up and find it was all a bad dream. He realized, however, that Uncle Alf had made a lot of sense. He'd explained Bud's rescue, and, come to think of it, he could easily have found out Sam's name from papers in his saddlebags, while Righto had been at the stable the day before.

Sam had come to the window that must be Dolly's, if Uncle Alf was right. It was shut tight, and a drawn shade blocked his view of the inside. Sam examined it carefully, and noticed that the putty was old and crumbling near the middle frame, where the lock was. He worked at the place with Bud's knife until he could insert the blade between the wood and the glass, and chip out a piece of glass large enough for him to reach in to the lock. Slowly and quietly he raised the sash and listened.

There was no sound inside except, perhaps, faint breathing. He couldn't be sure. He eased himself over the sill and stepped into the room, pushing the window shade aside and letting a little of the dawn light in.

With relief, Sam saw that Dolly was lying on the bed. As he approached he saw her eyes open wide. She put a finger to her lips and nodded toward the door. Sam heard faint snores from the hall.

"Your friend McDonald is out there," she whispered. "How did you get away?"

"Bud set me free. He's unconscious now, from hunger and exposure mainly, I think. But he's alive."

Dolly's silent sigh of relief changed to a gasp when Sam added, "I left him at the cabin." His hand tightened on her arm reassuringly. "I had to, Dolly. He's safest that way, anyhow, as long as Evan thinks he's me. We have to keep Evan from getting suspicious, until I can bring the law here. Has Evan tried to harm you?"

She shook her head. "I think he's almost convinced that I believe you're Bud."

"How can I steal a horse, Dolly, and where's the nearest law?"

NEITHER of them had noticed that the snoring had stopped, but Sam heard the door latch click. Still on his knees beside the bed, he whirled to face a man and a sixgun, silhouetted against the light of the hall.

"You're not getting either," rasped Mc-

Donald. "Put up your hands and get to your feet."

In a flash, Sam counted his slim advantages. McDonald would hold his fire, because Sam Russell was the one person who had to be alive if Evan's plan were to work. Sam also had the dimness of the room on his side. Instead of rising, he flattened out and rolled under the bed.

McDonald cursed and ran forward, stooping. "I'll smoke you out, you—"

With the speed of a whip, Sam's hand darted out and caught McDonald's ankle. He wrenched, rolling his body over with the effort, and McDonald went down with a crash. Before the gunman could regain his balance, Sam slid out, caught the wrist that was holding the Colt, and pinned it to the floor. With the other hand he grabbed McDonald's windpipe.

The fingers on the sixgun loosened, more quickly than Sam had expected. He picked up the gun and slammed it down hard on the side of McDonald's head. Dolly let out a little breath and closed her eyes.

"I know how you feel," said Sam, "but we haven't time to watch him. It's funny how much easier it is to gunwhip a man after it's been done to you lately." He pulled her to her feet. "We have to get out of here, both of us. We won't be able to fool Evan any more, once this hardcase comes to. Is there a sheriff in town?"

"There's a crazy old deputy, but he'd be of no use. Anyway, Evan has had plenty of time. He ought to be getting back here with Bud any minute. We have to get to town and back before he finds McDonald."

As if in answer to her words, they heard the sound of hoofs. "One horse, coming fast," said Sam going to the window. "It's Evan, all right, but he's alone. Get back into bed."

Dolly did as she was told. "But what good will that do?"

"There's nothing to do but stall and hope we can get away later." He closed the door quietly. "Evan may be worried. Bud looks a lot worse than a man would after the fight we had last night. When Evan comes in here, find out what you can from him."

He went around to the other side of the bed and crawled under, pulling the still unconscious McDonald in after him.

Soon there were heavy footsteps in the corridor, and Evan's voice shouted, "Mac!"

Evan flung the door open and looked inside. Then he strode away, still calling Mac.

"He'll be back," whispered Sam. "Hang on."

Sam was right. After a few moments, Evan's footsteps grew louder again, and then Sam could see his feet in the doorway.

"Dolly!" Evan said harshly.

Dolly muttered sleepily. Evan walked over to the bed and touched her shoulder.

"Mm . . . oh, Evan," she mumbled, yawning. "Did you bring Bud back from the cabin?"

"Where's Mac?"

"How should I know? Was I supposed to watch him? I thought it was the other way around."

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the sound of Evan pacing up and down.

"Did you bring Bud back?" asked Dolly again.

"Yeah," said Evan. "At least, I think so. Dolly, how badly did Bud get beaten up in the fight last night?"

"Gosh, it was pretty dark," answered Dolly. "But bad enough, I'd think, what with that table broken up and all."

"Oh, yeah, the table. Well, Harry's bringing him in. He's still out cold." Evan turned and started for the door, just as McDonald groaned. "What was that?"

"Me-me," said Dolly. "I have a headache."

"Ev—" moaned McDonald, before Sam could silence him. "Got a gun—"

Sam rolled out from under the bed and leaped to his feet, Mac's gun in his hand. "Okay, Evan," he said. "Let's have your gun."

But Evan whirled, turning his gun on Dolly. "Go ahead, shoot! But I'll get her if you do. Mac, get up and take your gun back."

They stood there, Sam covering Evan, Evan holding a blue barrel not a foot from Dolly's face. Sam gave McDonald his gun.

"Keep her covered, Mac," said Evan. He nodded at Sam. "You come with me."

They went down the hall to the big main room. "Sit down, Sam Russell," said Evan.

"You're sure who I am now?"

"You're damn right."

"Still," said Sam, "it's going to be awkward, having *two* of us around. That was quite a scheme of yours, but it's spoiled now."

"Don't be so sure."

"I am sure," said Sam, sounding more positive than he felt. "You can try to kill Bud again, and maybe succeed this time. But I'll have a mighty persuasive story to tell, when you explain to people around here that Bud Reynolds is crazy. Maybe I'll persuade somebody that I'm not Bud Reynolds, and not crazy, either. And there's Dolly. Do you think you can keep her quiet?"

"I can keep her quiet," said Evan savagely. "I can keep the whole damn bunch of you quiet."

"But then you'll have a few dead bodies to explain."

EVAN smiled. "Three dead bodies—three charred corpses—Bud Reynolds, Dolly Johnson and Evan Ames."

He chuckled, and then he threw back his head and laughed, almost uncontrollably. Sam tensed to spring, but Evan sobered abruptly. "Stay where you are," he ordered. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one, and continued pacing.

"I was smart," he said. "I knew the scheme might not work. It was too complicated, that plan to kill Bud and make people think you were Bud and that you were nuts. I'd have killed you, too, eventually, but I'd have had witnesses to prove it was self-defense." He paused ruefuly. "It was a good plan, though, because if it had worked I'd have gotten the ranch and Dolly, too."

He shrugged. "But it didn't. Anyway, I've been prepared for that. As soon as Bud was out of the way, I sold every head of cattle on the ranch. I have fifty thousand bucks in cash right here." He patted his pocket. "So now the ranch is going to burn down. It'll be a terrible tragedy, because Bud Reynolds is going to be burned to death, Dolly Johnson will perish, and—" he bowed to Sam—"there'll be a third body consumed in the flames, which everyone will assume is Evan Ames." He chuckled again, seeing the horror in Sam's eyes.

"And," he continued, tossing his cigarette into the fireplace, "by the time anybody from Empty Boot comes poking around in the ruins, even if there's anything to find that might make them suspicious, Evan Ames will be so far away they'll never find him."

Sam was fresh out of answers. Evan's alternate scheme was brutally simple, and it seemed to Sam much more likely to succeed than the first one. Evan's second gunman would soon arrive with Bud, so it would be three armed men against a girl, a starved and beaten invalid, and one hell of a hero.

"You think you can leave us here, even tied up, and be sure one of us won't get free before we're burned to death?"

"I'll take care of that," said Evan. "You won't feel a thing."

He walked toward Sam, raising his gun to waist level, until he was only a couple of feet away. In that split second when Evan's finger curled over the trigger, Sam leaned far enough back in his chair to overturn it. At the same time he brought his feet up and pushed hard into Evan's belly. Evan staggered, as the chair crashed over and Sam somersaulted backward.

Sam crouched for an instant, then plunged for the gun. Both went down, rolling on the floor, straining every muscle for possession of the weapon. Sam fought like a madman, staying on top of Evan, twisting his gun hand until Evan howled with pain and rage. Finally Evan's fingers slacked on the gun butt, and Sam wrenched it away.

He heard a rasping voice say, "Drop that gun."

Sam spun onto his back, saw McDonald, and pulled the trigger, all in one motion. Mac shot too, the explosions simultaneous. Sam felt a hot grinding pain in his right arm. The gun was slipping out of his fingers in spite of his efforts to hold it. Mac clutched his stomach and sank to the floor in a crouch.

"I can still shoot," he grunted.

Sam heard a shot as his gun slid from his hand. But he felt no new jarring pain. To his astonishment, Mac jerked convulsively and crumbled to the floor. Evan was staring at the window, and Sam looked there too.

Uncle Alf was grinning at him. "Some-

times," he said, "it's a pleasure to be in on a shooting." He swung his shotgun straight at Evan, who had his eye on the gun Sam had dropped.

"Nice timing, Uncle Alf," said Sam with difficulty. The numb ache in his arm was beginning to spread over his whole body. "Watch Evan, and watch for another one," he muttered. Everything was beginning to go around in circles, and it seemed to be getting darker.

Dolly ran into the living room. "Uncle Alf!" she cried with relief.

"Sure," he chirped. "I'm the deputy, ain't I?" He handed her the shotgun and picked the two sixguns off the floor. "Keep this coyote covered while I tie him up."

"Tell him," gasped Sam to Dolly, "there's another gunman coming, with Bud."

"Oh, Bud's all right," said Uncle Alf, chuckling. "I interrupted that other fellow on the way here. Bud's in my wagon. Reckon Dolly and I can get him inside."

But that was all Sam heard.

When he came to he was lying on the sofa. A bandage was on his shoulder, and Dolly was leaning over him.

"It's only a flesh wound," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Wobbly. How's Bud?"

"The doctor says he just needs a good rest and plenty to eat."

"And Evan?"

"Uncle Alf's taken him to town."

Sam grinned. "I still can't believe Uncle Alf is real."

Dolly laughed. "He's been deputy sheriff for ages, but he never had any crimes to solve till now. Nobody will ever understand how his mind worked, but apparently he snooped around all night, after seeing you in Empty Boot yesterday. He saw you this morning, and after that he saw Evan's other gunhand bringing Bud back. He got the gunhand with his shotgun, loaded them both in the wagon, and came here."

"Just in time."

"He'd been skulking around here for ten minutes," said Dolly, "waiting for the chance to get both Mac and Evan in the same room. If it hadn't been for you fighting Evan—"

"You mean I did something right?"

She leaned forward and patted his hand. "Sam, you've done everything right."

"I sure hope I can keep that up. Dolly, I guess Bud means a lot to you."

There was a dimple in her cheek as she agreed. "Naturally. I've known him so long he's like a brother to me."

"That's all I wanted to know," said Sam. With his good left arm he pulled her toward him.

Afterward she leaned back and looked at him with a small smile of wonder on her pretty face.

"You know," she said, "now that I'm getting to know you, you don't look like Bud at all. Whatever made me think you did?"

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

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Featuring A Review of Columbia's

SEVENTH CAVALRY

starring

RANDOLPH SCOTT and BARBARA HALE

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

J. CARROLL NAISH

THE WAR AT

RHIANNON WANTED to take the marshal's job, to fight the evil that threatened Molly . . . but first he must destroy the evil in his own heart

THE trail town made a small break in the flowing sweep of prairie. It was a shipping point for Texas cattle, nestled in the crook of Spanish River, and they called it Peaceville. The name was a poor facade for the seething dissension which was rife in the tawdry crosshatching of irregular houses and streets.

Doc Stern sat this morning in one of the town's dozen saloons, talking it over with Regis O'Herlihy, who ran the big general store, and Huck Winters, the mild-mannered town marshal. Doc was a small plump man with a chubby, ruddy face and a cloudy ruff of thinning white hair like a snowy nimbus circling his head. He bore himself with an air of benign saintliness that was wholly spurious. He expressed himself with sweeping gestures, and his alert blue eyes sparkled with shrewness.

"Boys," Doc said as they sat sipping their usual morning stirrup cup, "Peaceville's split down the center. Jess Renard and his crooked gambling interests promote the lawless elements on one side, riding the town to hell and gone with the trade from wild trail hands. And the plain, ordinary people—merchants, professional men, honest saloonkeepers, and the farmers who patronize 'em—are on the other side; people who want to see schools, churches, and ladies' aid societies come to Peaceville. As conditions stand, the name of our community makes us a laughing stock from the Rio Grande to Montana."

Regis O'Herlihy, a gaunt, salty-tongued man in a shapeless black suit, nodded moodily. "There were two shootings in Renard's Keno House last night. The question is, what do we do about it?"

Both old men looked at frail little Huck Winters, whose faded eyes widened in alarm. He raised his hands. "Don't look at me, fellows. I'm no fighter. I told you that when you talked me into wearing this badge."

"That's so, Huck," Doc agreed. "But, as things stand, we need more than token authority behind that badge. The time has come to get rough. We're declaring war, and there'll be no middle ground or second choice in this fight."

"You know I stand or fall with you all the way, Doc," Huck said, "but—" he unpinned the badge on his vest and tossed it on the table —"getting tough is out of my league."

The three sat staring at the tarnished badge. Doc was no fist-or-gun man himself, and Regis O'Herlihy, whose big old lion's face held the fearless and uncompromising stubborness of a man who'd come up the hard way, had long since settled into the arthritic stiffness that had ended his best days. Meanwhile the issue between the wild and the progressive factions of Peaceville was being won by Jess Renard.

PEACEVILLE

By T. V. OLSEN

Doc stood, rammed his hands in his hip pockets, and sauntered to the swing doors, frowning preoccupiedly out at the street. The morning smell of cool dust lifted from it. A man on a lean nag came down the street, dismounted before the saloon, and tied up. Doc stepped aside to let him enter. He was a big, bull-shouldered man, built like a blacksmith. The black hair of his temples was touched with little devil's horns of white, though he probably wasn't past thirty. The set of his broad face suggested that he rarely smiled.

As he moved to the bar, Doc walked briskly back to his table. "Do you see what I see?" he asked in a loud excited whisper.

"It's too good to be true," O'Herlihy agreed.

"He's a stranger," Huck Winters said.

"He has a Big Fifty in his saddle scabbard," Doc said. "His clothes're grease stained. He's a hide hunter, I'd say, just off the prairie."

"Are you thinking along the same lines as I am?" O'Herlihy asked.

"I think so," Doc said. "Gentlemen, let's talk to him."

The three began a concerted move toward the bar. The swinging doors parted again and Keno Paul, one of the dealers from Renard's Keno House, came in. He was a longish, frock-coated man who moved with easy grace to the bar, and lifted two fingers. The three slacked back into their chairs and waited, because Keno Paul was a congenital troublemaker, a gun-wild young man given to loud talk. He was regarding the big stranger now with a wicked interest.

HE'S TACKLING the wrong man this time, Doc thought, with utter certainty, yet without knowing why he thought so.

"You look lonely, stranger. Drink with me." Keno Paul slid his bottle of whisky down the bar. It stopped a scant inch from the big man's elbow. He looked up.

"Thank you, no," he said in a soft Southern voice. "I don't drink whisky." He nodded toward his glass. "Beer's good for the liver, though."

Keno Paul cocked his head as though unable to accept the evidence of his ears. He said loudly, "Are you trying to make trouble, mac?" He banged his glass on the bar. "Speak up so I can hear you!"

"You heard me," the stranger said in a softly measured voice. "Now hear this. I come in here to drink. I'm not looking for trouble, but if you want it, just keep this up."

There was open surprise in Keno Paul's face. His hand brushed back his frock coat and settled uncertainly on the butt of his holstered gun. It was a mistake. The stranger's huge hand swept up the bottle of whisky and threw it, all in one movement. It hit Keno Paul in the shoulder with bruising force, enough to half turn him.

He cursed and dragged at his gun. The stranger followed up the bottle, yanked away the gun, caught Keno Paul by the neck with one hand, swung him in a complete circle, and let go. The bar brought him up with a crash. His face twisted with rage, Keno Paul swung a long booted leg up in a vicious kick.

The big man turned so that it took him high on the outer thigh. He caught a handful of the dealer's pleated white shirt, hauled him in close, raised his opposite fist, and landed a sledging smash along Keno Paul's shelving jaw. The dealer fell upright against the bar; then, his face a study in blankness, he crumpled limply to the floor.

The stranger laid Keno Paul's gun gently on the bar and walked back to his beer. He finished it in a swallow, leaning against the bar with the relaxed poise of a big cat, with the air of a man who'd just performed an unpleasant but minor chore. Yet Doc could have sworn that the little white devil's horns above his temples were erect and bristling, as though in silent token of held-in rage.

Rory, the bartender, set his shotgun on the bar, then moved quietly around the endgate, carrying a pail of water. He poured it all over Keno Paul, who sat up, spluttering. Holding to the edge of the bar, the dealer stood painfully and retrieved his gun. Rory very quietly set down the pail and, without a word, lifted his shotgun from the bar and faced Keno Paul, standing between him and the stranger. The dealer hesitated, then pivoted and stamped out.

Rory is a capable man, Doc reflected, but a dour one without civic spirit, who cared only about seeing decency enforced in his own place; the rest of the town could go hang. This stranger, though—there might be possibilities there.

The stranger was heading out the door. "Hold up, friend," Doc called. The big man hesitated before stepping over to their table. "Sit down and have a drink," Doc suggested.

"I don't drink whisky, suh."

"All right, you'll have colored water. Only sit down. I'm Doctor Stern. This is Mr. O'Herlihy here—and Huck Winters."

The big man shook hands all around, and said his name was Burke Rhiannon. He was a hide hunter, as Doc had surmised.

"It's a lively profession," Doc said craftily, "but the buffalo are going. A man should give an eye to the future. In five years or less, the buffalo'll all be gone. What then?"

Rhiannon hesitated. "By cutting it thin, I should have enough then for a spread of my own."

"By cutting it *damn* thin, I'll wager. Tell you what, friend. I like your face. You seem a capable man. I'm going to give you a chance to make a hundred dollars a month, plus free lodgings."

"Doing what?"

Doc picked up the badge Huck had thrown down. "Wearing this. Of course, your appointment is subject to endorsement by the town council, but since we're three of the five members—"

"No," the big stranger said.

"For heavens sake!" Doc rapped out, growing angry. "An opportunity like this doesn't come along often."

Rhiannon's face darkened. "I'm not going to argue about it," he said flatly, and walked out.

"Now what?" Huck Winters asked.

"Huck," Doc said, "believe it or not, that young man is going to be our next marshal. But meanwhile—" Doc pinned the badge to its former position on Huck Winter's vest.

"Hey!" Huck croaked.

"Wear it a little longer, Huck," Doc cajoled. "In two, three days at the most, I'll have brought Rhiannon around."

"All right, Doc," Huck said reluctantly. "I'll wear it three more days, my resignation being effective as of midnight on the third day. Only you'd better hurry. He's set in his mind like a government mule. And he may have left town by tomorrow."

DOC walked into Regis O'Herlihy's store that afternoon, during a professional lull, to bandy wit with the proprietor, and found Burke Rhiannon passing the time of day with O'Herlihy's pretty daughter, Molly. Doc had given thought all morning as to how to press Rhiannon into the town's service, and now his shrewd eyes twinkled with the crystallization of a solution. But his face was grave and composed.

"Afternoon, Mr. Rhiannon. Miss O'Herlihy, is your father about?"

Before she could reply, O'Herlihy came out of the back room. His expression of non-professional affability at the sight of Doc altered to an open scowl when he saw his daughter and Rhiannon in animated conversation. "Are you here to make a purchase, Mr. Rhiannon," he asked specifically, "or is there another matter?"

Rhiannon stumbled for words, his stolid poise deserting him. "Well—I'd like to look at some—some guns, suh."

O'Herlihy made a small gesture toward the gun rack, and Rhiannon stepped to it. O'Herlihy began talking to Doc. Rhiannon lifted a pistol from the rack and turned.

"Pardon, suh. Is this one of those new centerfire guns I've heard of?"

"Hm? Oh. Oh, yes." O'Herlihy took the gun from Rhiannon. "You haven't seen one of these before, have you, Doc? It's a new '72 model Colt's .45, the first of its kind in Peaceville."

"What's special about it?" Doc asked.

"It's a matter of ballistics," O'Herlihy said casually, proud at having an advantage on the learned Doc in a technical matter. "Till now, all revolvers have been rimfire—meaning they have a disadvantage in accuracy, as opposed to this new centerfire. When the firing pin hits the center of a cap, the powder is exploded with even force, and so it hurls the bullet more true."

"Is this one for sale, suh?" Rhiannon asked.

"It's bought, young man. I had to send back East for it. It just arrived. It was a special order by a friend of yours, Keno Paul. He hasn't called for it yet."

"Friend?" Rhiannon scratched his head. "I don't remember him."

"The party you messed up in Rory's this morning," Doc said.

Rhiannon nodded, eyeing the gun regretfully. "A good gun should be carried by a good man." He turned to Miss O'Herlihy. "Ma'am, I hope you won't think it abrupt of me, but I'd be obliged for the honor of your company on a buggy drive this afternoon."

O'Herlihy looked shocked; then he reddened with anger. "Young man, it is not the way even in Peaceville to make such overtures to a young lady within five minutes of meeting her!" As he spoke, his wrath heightened; his brogue deepened with anger. "And most especially it's not to my daughter you'll be making such overtures!"

"Ease off," Doc counseled softly in O'Herlihy's ear, and drew the storekeeper into the back room. "The lad will still make a fine marshal, Regis—if your Molly can persuade him to stay on."

"Are you suggesting I lend my own flesh and blood to such an end?"

"You want to make this town safe for her,

don't you?" Doc countered. "The best way to begin is by acquiring a peace officer like this one. Besides, he's a clean-cut boy. And surely a daughter of O'Herlihy can handle herself!"

O'Herlihy reluctantly agreed. He said to his daughter, "Molly, my dear, you're looking a bit peaked with all this bookkeeping and clerking. It would be good for you to get some fresh air this afternoon with Mr. Rhiannon, as he suggested. I'm obliged to you, young man."

"Thank you, suh," Rhiannon drawled, showing no surprise at the storekeeper's abrupt about-face.

Molly's blue eyes sparkled, and Doc grinned and winked at her. She knew well enough when her father had something up his sleeve.

"I should be pleased," she murmured.

Doc walked briskly to the marshal's office, where he found Huck Winters, his feet propped on his desk, his shirt open against the heat while he fanned himself with a folded newspaper.

"I think I've netted our fish, Huck," Doc said. He explained, "Molly O'Herlihy is our insurance that Rhiannon won't move on, at least not for a while. He's saving for a ranch; he'll need a job, so's not to cut into his savings. But it would be deplorable if he were to hire out to one of the local farmers before we can hook him on our marshal's bait. Especially since he's so damn obstreperous about it. Now, since you have so much time on your hands—"

"I get you, Doc," Huck Winters said. "The farmers'll be glad to cooperate; they want law and order in Peaceville as much as the merchants do. I'll pass the word. Rhiannon won't find a job within fifty miles of Peaceville."

THREE days went by, and by the evening of the third day Doc knew his plan had gone awry somewhere. He found himself no nearer his goal. It seemed more distant, if anything. True, thanks to little Molly O'Herlihy, Burke Rhiannon showed no inclination to leave Peaceville. Thanks to Huck Winters, who'd done his job well among the outlying farms, Rhiannon could find no local employment.

He took a room at the hotel, courted Molly in the evenings, slept all morning, and played two-handed stud with the Doc in the afternoon lulls. Meanwhile he stood obstinate in the face of Molly's sweet cajoling or Doc's casual suggestions. Rhiannon was bound and determined not to take that marshal's job, if he starved for it.

Doc finished his coffee and after-dinner cigar this evening and left the restaurant, his usual peace of mind disturbed beyond recall. There had been another shooting last night in one of Jess Renard's houses. Matters were going from bad to worse, and there was only one solution.

Doc saw the bitter object of his thoughts, Burke Rhiannon, standing in the shadows of O'Herlihy's store awning with Molly. Their low-voiced argument was a heated one. The girl's words carried clearly to Doc's alert ears.

"You're right," she said coldly. "A man should move out if he finds nothing here worth staying for."

"Maybe he should!"

Rhiannon abruptly left the board sidewalk and fell into step with Doc. They walked in silence till Doc said mildly, "Fight?"

"Doc," Rhiannon complained, "why is it women turn everything you say back on you? All I said was it might be a good idea to leave Peaceville—meaning I'd like to leave and take her with me. There's nothing for me here."

"No luck job-hunting, eh?" Doc said genially.

Rhiannon shook his head morosely.

Doc chuckled. "And trouble with women. There'll be no women for me. I'll stick to booze. The worst thing you can get from that is a hangover."

"You like to drink much, Doc?"

"Too damned much," Doc said wryly.

"Let's try drinking The First Chance dry," the younger man suggested.

Doc thought this was a splendid idea, and they entered that place. Once inside, Doc recalled that this was one of Renard's saloons. He hesitated, then shrugged and signaled the bartender for whisky, being old and wise enough to know there is little profit in carrying politics into your drinking.

Warmed by the internal glow of two quick ones, Doc said point-blank, "Why won't you take the marshal's job, son?"

Rhiannon was lifting his glass; he quietly set it down and stared at it. "A long time ago, Doc, back in Texas, a man made me mad. I beat him up and he died. I did it with my bare hands. I have a temper, Doc, and I'm scared of it, scared of what could happen if I take a job that demands violence. I get mad, I—I can't hold myself in. It was all I could do the other day to keep from taking that Keno Paul fellow apart. If he'd made me a little madder, I'd have broken his neck."

"That's a hell of a thing to live with," Doc said gently. "But you can't lick it by running from it, Burke."

"So you'd have broken Keno Paul's neck, eh?" said a mocking voice behind them. Both turned, and Keno Paul was there, assured and cocky and smiling. His new Colt centerfire jutted against the hip of his immaculate frock coat. "Well, why don't you finish the job now, mac?"

It was a bad moment, Doc knew—bad because Keno Paul had picked this time to drop in for a pick-me-up before going to work at the Keno House; bad because Doc could sense the dangerous anger straining behind Rhiannon's reserve. The big man spoke with a careful effort.

"Go your way, friend. I've no quarrel with you."

Keno Paul's grin was not pleasant. His eyes were bright, and he weighed every word before flinging them out. "How's your mother?"

"What?"

"She must come from fine gutter stock to spawn a yellow dog like you."

RHIANNON smashed his fist to the center of Keno Paul's grinning face; the man saw the blow coming and made no pretense of dodging. He took it full face and fell backward on the floor. He rolled over and came quietly to his feet, holding a handkerchief to his bleeding nose.

He said gently to Rhiannon, "Have you a gun?"

"No."

"I'll be back in five minutes. Get one." Keno Paul turned and walked from the saloon.

Rhiannon turned back to his drink. He swallowed it and rubbed his hand over his face, then settled a bitter stare on Doc. "All right, say it. He wanted me to do that, and I'm a damn fool."

"And maybe a dead one," said Doc, "which is more important. How well do you handle a sidearm?"

"I teethed on one," Rhiannon said. "But I don't own one now, and I'll not use one. Let him do his worst."

"I hope you're not disappointed," Doc said grimly. He signaled for two more drinks, but Rhiannon did not touch his. He only waited.

The swing doors parted, and a slim, frock-coated figure stood there. But it was not Keno Paul. Jess Renard stood at the door, a pale debonair ghost of a man, expensively dressed. He carried a light swagger stick, which he stood tapping against his palm, his dark eyes searching the bar. When they stopped on Doc and Rhiannon he stepped over to them immediately.

TOUGH ON CHEATERS

By LIMERICK LUKE

Two gamblers played poker in Tex.
With the aces all marked in their dex.
They found out too late
That in Tex. 'twas the fate
Of sharpers to hang by their nex!

"Mr. Rhiannon? I am Renard. I am here to speak of an unpleasant misunderstanding between you and my man Keno Paul. I have already spoken to him."

"What rock did you find him under?" Doc asked with quiet malice.

Renard smiled politely, vaguely. He had no use for Doc's dry acid humor. "Keno's a good boy."

"I know," Doc said. "He never hits below the knees."

"I had it that Mr. Rhiannon hit him first."

"After what he said, what would you expect Rhiannon to do, kiss him? Or didn't you hear that part of it?"

Renard sighed profoundly. "Keno may have omitted a detail or two. However, I'm sure he had his reasons. I told him not to trouble Mr. Rhiannon further. So let us drop the matter, shall we?"

Rhiannon shrugged. But Doc said, "What's the catch?"

Renard's politely bored pose sloughed away like the falling of a mask. "The catch, my fat friend, is that you call off your 'Throw Renard out of Peaceville' campaign, or leave town." He settled a flat stare on Rhiannon. "You I offer no alternative, since you're going to be our next marshal, I hear."

The big man shifted against the bar. "That's Doc's idea. You heard wrong."

"I don't think so. That's why you're leaving town—tomorrow."

Again the little devil's horns of white over Rhiannon's temples seemed to erect in anger. "You know," he said softly, "you shouldn't have said that. Until you did, I was planning to leave anyway."

Renard's teeth clicked, like the snap of a wolf. "You're leaving," he repeated. "Remember, be out by noon tomorrow." He turned and walked from the saloon.

Rhiannon turned his glass between his thick fingers, and was silent. Presently Doc, unable to hold his curiosity, said, "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking," Rhiannon said, smiling, "that he means his words. And I was thinking that a man would do well to heed his advice."

"You're thinking something else, too," Doc said dryly.

"Yes," the big man said slowly, soberly. "I don't like Renard or his heel-dogs. I don't like any man who thinks he can beat the game all the time, all the way. I'd like to help a man like that ride for a fall."

"In the capacity of town marshal?" Doc asked hopefully.

"Doc, I don't know. I just don't know. Let me think about it."

IT WAS almost midnight when Doc and Rhiannon left The First Chance, unhurriedly and only slightly unsteady. They'd heard the racketing echo of a shot a few minutes before, but had attached no special importance to it until now, when they saw the knot of men gathering about the mouth of an alley between the gunsmith's and the hotel. They headed that way. A man ran to meet them.

"Doc," he called, "it's Huck Winters! He's been shot in the back!"

Doc cursed softly and shoved through the crowd, dropping to his knees by his friend. The little marshal lay on his back. His gun hadn't been drawn. Doc made a cursory examination.

"He's alive, and that's about all. Here, two of you men, bear a hand. Carry him to my office."

Doc hurried ahead to get his equipment ready, angrily cleared his office of curious spectators who tagged along, and set to cleaning and dressing Huck's wound. The bullet had gone through a shoulder blade and had emerged high in the left chest. Doc had permitted only Rhiannon to remain in the office, though curtly refusing even his offer of aid.

When Doc finally straightened and went to the basin to wash his hands, Rhiannon said, "How will he be, Doc?"

"Reckon he'll live." Doc dried his hands. "He was shot close range, in the back—so close it left powder burns."

"Then he probably never saw the person who did it. The fellow stood in the shadows and shot him as he walked by the alley." Rhiannon hammered his fist against his palm. "Doc, who'd do such a thing? Who'd shoot a poor ineffectual little guy like Huck Winters in the back?"

"Can't you guess?" Doc said between his

teeth. "Renard's countering our campaign with one of his own. This was a warning for you—and me. Huck was expendable; no one'd miss him. He made a useless marshal. Before that he was nothing but the town drunk."

The big man said slowly, "Doc, he was shot for us. His death can't be for nothing. We have to—"

"Ease off, son. We'll scout out the alley where Huck was shot, come morning. We might find some useful evidence against Renard. It's too dark now." Doc ran a tired hand through his thinning hair. He glanced at his watch and then, strangely, at Huck. "Two minutes to midnight. Funny—in two minutes his resignation as town marsh is effective."

In the late dawn, Doc was roused from the leather couch in his office by a loud knocking at the door. "Coming, coming," he muttered, stepping to the cot to check his patient's condition, then moving to open the door.

Rhiannon stood there. He had his Sharps rifle under his arm. "I got up early to search the alley," he said. "I think I've found something that will hang Renard and Keno Paul."

"What?"

"Come along and find out. I'm going to see Renard right now. "I'd like you as a witness, Doc."

Doc asked no questions. He pulled his coat on over his sleep-rumpled clothes, and as an afterthought picked up Huck's badge, which he'd laid on the table, and handed it to Rhiannon. "Here, do this right. We'll worry about your official appointment later."

Rhiannon's jaw clenched in a struggle Doc could understand. He said finally, softly, "There are things a man has to do." He pinned the badge to his worn cowhide vest. "Let's go see Renard."

Jess Renard's office was in the rear of the Keno House. They went directly through the front rooms, ignoring the swamper who was cleaning up, and walked unceremoniously into the office without knocking. Renard was sitting back in his swivel chair, studying a ledger. He glanced up without surprise.

"It's almost your deadline to leave town, Rhiannon. What brings you gentlemen here?"

"Huck Winters was shot in the back last night," Rhiannon said.

"So I heard," Renard said carelessly. "But why come to me? I haven't lost any marshals."

"It's my idea," Rhiannon said, "that your boy Keno used that nice shiny new cannon of his on Huck—on your orders."

RENARD smiled. "No, hardly. That would be rather stupid of me, wouldn't it, when I'd be a natural first suspect?"

"I figured that might have occurred to you," Rhiannon said dryly. "Where is Keno Paul now?"

"It would seem that's his business and none of yours." Renard hesitated only a moment, then shrugged. "I hardly think it's worthwhile, but if you like—"

"We like," Doc said.

Renard stepped around his desk to the door and hailed the swamper.

"Go fetch Keno. He'll be sleeping at the hotel. Rouse him out and bring him here." He turned back to Doc and Rhiannon, eyeing them in a bored way. "You know, you're going to look damned foolish, if Keno Paul has an air tight alibi."

"Have you rigged one already?" Doc asked pleasantly.

Renard glanced at him. "Let's be frank, Doctor," he said, with surprising amiability. "You're wielding a bludgeon for me. Why? Because I fleece a few suckers with rigged wheels?"

"Isn't that reason enough?" Doc asked. "You seem to be singing soft all of a sudden. Getting scared?"

"What should I be?" But Renard didn't speak again until Keno Paul sauntered into the room. "Keno, these gentleman want to know where you were last night when Marshal Winters was shot."

Keno's face took on mock concern. "He was shot? I didn't hear about it. But it's the best thing a man could do for the old turnip."

"Where were you from eleven till twelve last night?" Rhiannon asked.

"I don't remember," Keno said blandly.

"You'd better try harder."

"Have you evidence?" Renard asked crossly. "If not, Mr. Rhiannon, you'd do well to make no more wild accusations."

"I have enough evidence to hang you," the

big man said. He pulled a cartridge case from his pocket and passed it to Doc for his inspection.

"You shot Huck from the alley, Keno, and retreated to the rear of the buildings. You scaled the board fence there and stopped on the other side of it long enough to eject that spent shell. You were getting rid of evidence, but instead you gave it to us. I followed your tracks back beyond the fence and found the shell."

Doc, examining the shell, saw Rhiannon's point then. There was a tiny, central depression in the shell cap made to receive a firing pin.

It was a centerfire shell for a centerfire gun—of which Keno's new Colt .45 was the only one in Peaceville.

Keno Paul grasped the situation. "You're crazy," he said. He laughed uncertainly. "That kind of evidence will never stand up in court."

"I'm willing to take the chance," Rhiannon murmured. "Are you?"

Keno Paul palmed his gun suddenly and swung it up from the hip. "Give me the bullet, Doc."

"You're making it worse for yourself," Doc said sharply.

Keno Paul smiled sardonically. "I believe you." He lifted the gun. "This doesn't. Give me the bullet."

Doc gauged the man's features for a possible bluff, and saw a threat there that was very close and very real. He handed the shell case to the dealer.

Too late, Keno," Rhiannon said casually.

"What d'you mean?"

"Ask Renard. He's already sold you out."

Keno Paul's astonished gaze flicked only briefly from the big man's face to Renard's. It was long enough for Rhiannon to make a long sweeping blow with his rifle barrel that knocked the gun down in Keno's hand. The dealer's reflex pulling of the trigger squeezed off a shot; the slug drove harmlessly into the floor.

Before he could bring the gun level again, Rhiannon's big frame pinned him helpless against the wall. Rhiannon wrenched the gun from his numbed fingers with contemptuous ease.

"Cool and easy, boy," Doc said. "You didn't get mad a bit."

Rhiannon stepped back and motioned toward the door with the rifle. "You two know where the jail is."

Renard stood, clenching the edges of his desk till his knuckles whitened.

"If you want trouble, Rhiannon, just take me to jail. You'll get all you want. And I'll be out in two days."

"You'd better sing soft, Jess," Doc said. "You and your crooked operators have run roughshod over this town like a pack of wild swine. Who'll get you out? The merchants and farmers who want to see this become a decent town?

"There isn't a jury in this country that *won't* convict you. All the people needed to get rid of you was an excuse. Now they've got one. Come on, Burke, let's lock them up. And then I think you could stand a good word in certain quarters."

Fifteen minutes later, at O'Herlihy's store, Doc finished a flourishing narrative to the proprietor. Rhiannon and Molly stood self-consciously by, not talking.

"He did a good job," was O'Herlihy's reluctant verdict. "But in a trail boomtown, won't others of Renard's ilk drift in?"

"And out," Doc said smoothly. "I think—" he glanced at Rhiannon— "we have a new marshal who can handle them."

Burke Rhiannon nodded with the quiet satisfaction of a man who has fought his fight and won.

O'Herlihy, too honest not to admit a wrong judgment, shook his hand.

"Lad, I'd invite you to supper, but all we're having is crow, with humble pie for dessert." Doc chuckled. O'Herlihy lit up a stubby pipe and puffed contentedly, with an eye of parental indulgence on his daughter and Rhiannon. "It's a new day," he said. "A good one for all."

Doc took the storekeeper's arm and propeled him out of the store. "Let's start it off with a drink," Doc said.

Rhiannon and Molly hardly noticed them go.

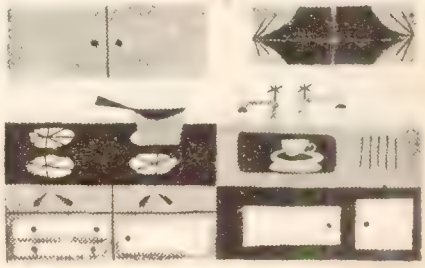
test your reading...

is the word

chicken

this?... or this...?

"chicken"



"kitchen"

Believe it or not, millions of school children can't read a simple word like "chicken." They also mix up "soldier" with "shoulder," "untied" with "united," and even "saw" with "was"!

Why? Because the way they're taught to read is wrong!

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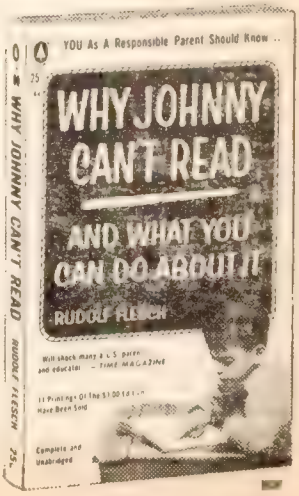
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Mary said, "I've lied to you and to everyone else."

No More Tears

TOMMY HAD FORGIVEN Mary's past, but he couldn't forget . . .

not when her secret was an ever-present threat to their happiness

WHEN Tommy Austin saw the wanted dodger, he felt as if someone had sneaked up and hit him below the belt. Tommy had come to see his girl and—but first, it ought to be made clear that everybody in the little cowtown of Cottersville said it couldn't have happened to two nicer youngsters, this falling for each other in the way that gives you a nice, warm feeling in your heart. And people were right about it.

Take this boy, Tommy Austin, a long, lean drink of water, with a friendly grin and not much to say, even to the girl. He was a boy who had worked his head off to make something of the run-down Triangle, and he had about gotten the job done. People, including kids and dogs, liked him, without stopping to reason why.

By BEN FRANK

On this Saturday in June, a week and a day before he and the girl were to be married, he rode his ornery hammerhead into town and, right away, folks somehow felt a little better about everything in general. Just thinking about Tommy and the girl, folks knew that the world wasn't such a bad place, after all.

Tommy stepped down from the saddle and ground-hitched his horse in the afternoon shade. Wide at the shoulders, flat waisted, he stood for a moment, his big hat tipped back on his sandy hair, smiling and squinting against the sun's brightness toward the bakeshop where the girl would be waiting for him. Then he stepped up on the rattly board walk and headed that way.

He spoke to some loafers in front of Jess Stone's barber shop. Old Doc Biddle kidded, "Well, son, you don't have much time left for being your own boss, do you?"

Doc was one of Tommy's favorite people. Grinning, he went on, his big boots clumping, his spurs jingling. It was a fine, lazy day, with the sun warm through his cotton shirt. Tommy felt fine and happy, and eager to see the girl. But, in spite of his eagerness, he stopped in at the post office. He'd answered some furniture ads. Not that he and the girl had money for buying any fancy furniture, but they could dream, couldn't they?

"Any mail for me?" he asked.

Wilkins, the postmaster, said, "Yep, it's around here somewhere, Tommy boy."

It was while the old man was rummaging around for the mail that Tommy saw the dodger. "WANTED!" it screamed at him. "One thousand dollars reward for the capture, dead or alive, of Dusty Drake, escaped convict, serving a life sentence for robbery of the mails, and murder." That was when young Tommy Austin felt a sudden cold sickness hit him in the pit of his stomach.

He glanced through the barred window. Wilkins was busy sorting through a pile of mail. Tommy eased up to the poster. It looked new; probably it had been put on the hook, along with a dozen others, only this morning. If it disappeared, he reasoned, it wouldn't be missed, for nobody out here in Wyoming gave a hoot about a killer who'd done his dirty work in Missouri. And if it disappeared, the girl would probably never know that Dusty Drake had escaped.

With a big brown hand that wasn't quite steady, Tommy tore the dodger from the wire hook and crammed it into a pocket. A few seconds later he stepped out into the bright sunshine of the street. But all his happiness was gone now, replaced by a numbing anxiety.

He wasn't exactly afraid for the girl's safety. It seemed a long chance that Dusty Drake would find her, even if he tried. But she would be worried sick if she knew he was loose; and Tommy loved her so much that he would gladly die if dying would save her from worry or trouble. Suddenly he was wishing that the wedding was tomorrow instead of a week from Sunday. For some reason, a week had become a span of time without end. And then he was remembering back three months, to that day when he'd first met the girl.

It had been a surprisingly warm day in March when Tommy had swung from the saddle and wandered toward Jess Stone's barbershop. He hadn't had a haircut for six weeks, and looked like a shaggy-headed saddle bum.

She came out of the general store, a tall, willowy girl with fair hair that looked like a halo in the bright sun. She came straight toward him, the March wind whipping her clean cotton dress about her trim ankles. Funny how it had happened. One minute he hadn't known she existed; the next minute, he knew he'd never forget her if he lived to be a hundred.

She had long silky lashes and clear blue eyes. She went right on along the street without smiling at him. But their eyes had met, and in that moment something had happened to him and the girl, even if neither one of them had let on.

OLD DOC BIDDLE had been standing in the doorway of the barbershop, grinning faintly. He hadn't missed a trick—not old Doc, who'd brought Tommy into the world and was proud of the fact.

"Her name's Mary Mitchell, son," Doc said, "and she makes the best apple pies you ever tasted. But you'd better get slicked up be-

fore you go buying a pie from her. You look downright repulsive."

Tommy went into the shop and climbed into the barber chair. "The works," he said to Jess Stone. Then he added, "Where'd this Mary Mitchell come from?"

Jess shrugged. "As far as I know, she's never told anybody."

When Tommy got out of the barbershop, looking more like a civilized human being than a hairy ape, he angled over to the bakeshop and went in. The girl came in from a back room, and for the first time he saw her smile. There was a dimple in each cheek, and a humorous twinkle came into her eyes. And yet, there was something in her expression that told him she'd met up with a bad deal at some time in her life.

"What'll you have, mister?" she had asked in a pleasant voice.

"They tell me you make good apple pies," he said, smiling back at her. "That's what I'll have—an apple pie."

She lifted a golden-crusted pie out of the showcase and began to wrap it up for him. That was when he saw she wore a wedding ring. Damn old Doc, anyway! he had thought despairingly. He could've told me she was already married.

Then the tike came into the room, a blue-eyed baby girl just learning to toddle on her own. She took one look at Tommy and seemed to decide he was her dish. Laughing, she held out her chubby arms. Of course, there was only one thing for a boy like Tommy to do.

He swung her up to his shoulder and said, "Hi, Toots."

The girl behind the counter smiled and said, "Her name's Julie Mitchell."

"I'm Tommy Austin," he said. "And I suppose she's your—"

"I'm her mother," Mary Mitchell said proudly.

Some guys have all the luck, Tommy thought. Aloud he said, "Guess I'd better be heading back to the ranch."

He stood Julie on her uncertain legs and picked up the apple pie. No matter how good it was, he knew he'd lost his appetite. At the door he turned for one last look at Mary.

"Come again, Mr. Austin," she said. Then, with a little lift of her shoulders—it was as if she'd read his mind—she added, "There isn't any Mr. Mitchell. I lost my husband a few months ago."

That was how it began between Tommy and Mary and, thinking about it, he marveled at the wonder of it. Then he remembered the wanted dodger in his pocket, and again felt a touch of that cold sickness in the pit of his stomach. But he was grinning when he stepped into the bakeshop.

At the jingle of the door bell, Mary came into the room, a smudge of flour on her nose, the humorous twinkle in her eyes. "Tommy!" she cried happily. The next moment, he was holding her close. "Hey!" she said, shoving him away and fighting for breath. "Are you trying to crack some ribs?"

Her eyes were on a level with his chin, and there was nothing but happiness in their expression. In three months he'd done that much for her.

"Come on," she said. "I've got something for you."

He followed her into the back room, where she did the baking. Coffee bubbled on the stove, and a fresh apple pie stood on the work table.

Mary shoved a chair up to the table for him and said, "I know it's hopeless, but the least I can do is try to fill up that hollow space inside you."

He sat down and watched her pour two cups of coffee, thinking that she was the loveliest thing in the world. "Where's Julie?" he asked.

"She has a runny nose, and Mrs. Riggs is looking after her today. Don't worry, it's not serious."

"I wish we were getting married tomorrow," he blurted.

Something in his voice frightened her. "What's wrong, Tommy?" she asked.

HE WONDERED if he ought to tell her about Dusty Drake, after all. But at that moment the door bell jingled and she went out to wait on a customer. During the time she was gone, he again decided that what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. The

shine of her eyes, her laughter—he didn't want to spoil any of it by mentioning the outlaw.

Mary came back into the room. "Why didn't you say I had flour on my nose?" she demanded. "One of my customers had to tell me. A fine husband you'll make!"

He grinned. "I like you best with flour on your nose."

She sat down across from him and took a sip of coffee. "Stop looking at me as if I had two heads. Eat your pie, you big ape." Then she reached out and touched his big brown hand with her slim fingers. "I never dared hope I'd be so happy—or so lucky!"

"I'm the lucky one," he said. And then he thought of the dodger in his pocket, and felt a cold lump squeeze into his throat. Maybe their luck wouldn't hold.

"Julie and I will be expecting you for dinner tomorrow," Mary was saying.

He laughed and put down his fork. "You'll have to do all the cooking for me in the next fifty years. You shouldn't want me to dinner tomorrow."

"Don't worry, I'll get even with you after I've hooked you for sure," she said, laughing back at him.

That's the way it was between them, sometimes serious, sometimes kidding. They were old enough to give and take, wise enough to understand, and young enough to be happy. Tommy stood, lifted her to her feet, and kissed her.

"You take good care of yourself, Mary," he said. "I'd hate to have anything spoil my dinner tomorrow."

"You take care of yourself, too," she said, but she wasn't laughing now. She reached up and straightened his shirt collar. "Tommy, a week's not very long. Nothing important can happen in a week, can it?"

She was smiling, but she was frightened. He could tell by the little catch in her voice. She was frightened without knowing exactly why. He wanted to take her in his arms and assure her that nothing could spoil things for them, but he knew doing that would only give away his own feeling of anxiety.

He chuckled and said, "You bet, a lot could happen. Some other girl might grab me."

"Scram!" she said. "I never could stand anyone who brags about himself."

Grinning, he went out to his hammerhead, swung into the saddle, and rode from town. He'd ridden almost a mile before he remembered he'd forgotten to show her the furniture folders he'd gotten in the mail.

When he came to the spring in Wildhorse Canyon, he stopped for a drink. Sitting in the shade, he pulled the dodger from his pocket and studied the killer's face—a young, handsome face with a cruel mouth and expressionless eyes. He felt a cold, angry hate for this man, Dusty Drake.

Mary had never told anyone else in Cottersville about Dusty Drake. But right here at the spring, she'd told Tommy. Remembering, he began to rip the dodger into tiny pieces. He'd gone to town that day, taking along a spare saddle pony for Mary to ride. He'd wanted her to see his ranch.

"Gee, Tommy," she said, "I haven't ridden a horse for ages, and I've probably forgotten how."

But she hadn't forgotten. She raced him across the rolling hills to the mouth of the canyon, her hair flying, her eyes filled with excitement. They stopped at the spring and sat down on these same flat rocks in the shade. The ornery hammerhead reached over to take a bite out of Mary's pony, and Tommy stood to jerk a knot in the hammerhead's tail. Then he looked down at Mary and forgot he wasn't going to ask her to marry him until she'd had a chance to see for herself the kind of life he could offer her.

"Why wait?" he said, thinking out loud.

She glanced up in surprise. "Wait for what, Tommy?"

"To ask you to marry me. I was going to show you the old house first, but—"

She began to cry, and it scared him half to death. It was terrible, the way she cried, not making a sound, while the tears ran along her cheeks.

"Tommy," she whispered brokenly, "I've lied to you and everyone in Cottersville. The man I married isn't dead. He's in prison for life. That's why I came way out here from Missouri, so no one would know about it. And I called myself Mary Mitchell instead of Mary

Drake. Mitchell is my maiden name, and I took it back after the marriage was annulled."

She drew a deep breath. "You see, I was awfully young and alone, and afraid of being alone, when I met Dusty. I had no idea what he was until after it was too late. I couldn't let Julie grow up back there, where people knew her father was a murderer. I never intended to tell anyone, not even you, Tommy. But—well, I'm in love with you."

STUNNED, he stood looking at her. It took him two or three minutes to get his mind back in focus. And all the time the tears burned their way along Mary's pale cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," she said, getting to her feet, "but that's the way it is, and there's no changing it. I hope, for Julie's sake, you'll not tell anyone. Shall we ride back to town?"

That pulled him together. "You mean you don't want to see the kind of a dump I'm asking you to share with me?"

"You still want to marry me?"

Did he want to? What a question! She hadn't had to tell him about Dusty Drake. But she'd told him, anyway, because she was that kind of a girl. He was so proud of her he wanted to stand up and cheer.

"My old shack is a junk pile," he said, grinning at her. "But maybe if you and Julie can put up with it and me for a few years, we can build a new house."

She began to cry again, but this time he didn't stand there like a dummy. He held her close and let her cry on his shoulder.

Actually, the house wasn't as bad as he'd said. She'd stood in the doorway, he remembered warmly, looking toward the snow-capped mountains with shining eyes.

"It's nice," she'd said. "It's wonderful! But it wouldn't make any difference, Tommy, if it were a cave in the side of a hill, so long as you went with it."

That was how it had happened. And, as people said, it couldn't have happened to two nicer kids. Smiling just a little, Tommy let the last scrap of paper fall into the water, and watched it float away. So much for Dusty Drake. He no longer had any claim on Mary or Julie. Feeling more cheerful, Tommy climbed aboard his horse and rode on to the Triangle.

About ten o'clock Sunday morning it began to rain, a fine, cold drizzle, sweeping down out of the mountains and sighing through the pines. Tommy first became aware of it when he heard it falling on the tin roof of the horse barn.

Saddle in hand, he went to the door and looked out. It wasn't going to be a pleasant ride to town, but nothing could have kept him from going. Dropping his gaze from the shrouded mountains to the Cottersville trail, he saw the three riders, their shoulders hunched against the rain.

The man riding in the middle was Sheriff Toby from Junction. He stepped down into the mud and said, "It's a hell of a day for June, eh, Tommy?" A big, blocky-faced man, he came on into the barn. He looked tired. "Right now," he said, "the boys and I could sure use a pot of coffee."

"You know where the makings are," Tommy said. "I'd fix it for you myself, only Mary's expecting me for dinner. Where're you headed, Sheriff?"

"Back to Junction. We've been out most of the night, looking for a man who tried to hold up the Junction-Cottersville stage. From the looks of things, he stopped a bullet. He should've been easy to find, but he wasn't."

He stepped out into the rain and called, "Come on, boys, let's see what Tommy's got in the house that's fit to eat."

Tommy flung the saddle over the hammerhead's unwilling back. All the worry and the half-formed fears he'd felt when he'd first seen the wanted dodger were with him again. But, he told himself, Dusty Drake wouldn't be out here in Wyoming, trying to rob a stage. If it had been a bank in Missouri—he led his horse into the rain and swung aboard.

The sheriff came to the door of the house and called, "Anybody who'd ride to town on a day like this just to see his girl isn't right in the head."

Tommy laughed good-naturedly and urged the hammerhead into a trot.

Wildhorse Canyon was a tumble of boulders, black and slick now with the falling rain. A man, Tommy thought uneasily, could

find a thousand hiding places here. He pulled up at the spring, remembering the tears on Mary's face when she'd told him that once she'd been Dusty Drake's wife. No more tears for her if he could help it! He rode on. The trail snaked up out of the canyon.

The rolling hills were frosted with a ghostly gray mist. Then, topping a long slope, he saw Cottersville, dingy and drab, he rain driving the smoke from a few chimneys toward the ground.

The small house where Mary and Julie

"You can't surrender, Poison Pete. I'm full up."

lived stood at the edge of town, sort of off by itself. Tommy rode around it and stabled his mount in an old shed. He could smell the woodsmoke from the kitchen range and, all at once, he felt half starved to death. He began to whistle softly. In a minute, he'd be in the cheerful house with the two people who meant more to him than anybody else in the world—Mary and Julie!

AMBLING to the back door, he knocked, but nothing happened. The door was locked. Maybe Mary and Julie had gone to church and hadn't returned home yet. On the way around to the front door he was surprised to see all the shades drawn.

The front door was locked, too. That seemed odd. Then he heard the lock click back, and there was Mary, her eyes wide and sick with fear, her face paper white.

"Come in, Tommy," she said in a strained voice.

Inside, the first thing he saw was the glint of a gun barrel. Dusty Drake sat on an old rocker, facing the door. He looked older and meaner than his picture had made him out to be. He shifted slightly and winced with pain, and Tommy saw then that the left leg of his trousers was caked with dried blood.

"Shut the door and lock it," Drake said in a hard, flat voice.

Tommy heard Mary shut the door behind him and turn the lock. Then he saw Julie. She sat on the floor in a corner of the room, her eyes filled with terror, and he wondered what Dusty Drake had done to frighten her like this. She seemed almost afraid to breathe.

"This is Tommy Austin," Mary said faintly.

"The boy friend, huh?" The killer's narrowed eyes slid over Tommy. "He's not much for looks, but he rides a good horse. I'll need a good horse tonight."

"Dusty came sometime while Julie and I were at church, Tommy," Mary began. "I left the house unlocked for you, and when I opened the door—"

"—here I was," Drake finished. "A real surprise for her. She had figured she'd never see me again. But it's not hard to trail a woman and a kid traveling alone. If I hadn't had bad luck last night with that stage—" Again he winced with pain.

Julie began to whimper, and Drake gritted, "Shut up, or I'll hit you again!"

The child became quiet instantly.

"Take a load off your feet, Austin," Drake said with a lift of his gun.

Tommy sat down carefully on the nearest chair. Now that the first shock was over, the wheels in his head began to turn.

"Why did you come here?"

"It's simple," Drake snapped. "Nobody here knows about me except you and Mary, and that doesn't count. Besides, I figured my wife could help me."

"She's not your wife!"

"Pardon me," Drake said mockingly. "It

slipped my mind. But no matter what she is, I need a doctor now. You're going to bring one to me, Austin. As unstrung as Mary is, I'm afraid to send her. She'd be sure to let something slip."

"I'll bring men with guns instead."

"You'll bring the doc! You'll tell him the kid's sick. You're going to walk out through that door and be back in fifteen minutes with him, or something you won't like will happen to Mary and the kid. Figure it this way, Austin. I have nothing to lose, and you have. Get moving, cowboy!"

Outside, it was raining harder. Tommy ran along the empty street, and all the time he was trying to figure a way out for Mary and the baby. He couldn't. The killer held all the aces.

Old Doc Biddle was eating his dinner, and came to the door with a napkin tucked under his double chin. After one look at Tommy he knew something was drastically wrong.

"It's Julie," Tommy said hoarsely. "She's sick!"

Doc didn't stop to ask questions. He grabbed up his medicine bag and an old slicker and followed Tommy back to Mary's house. Inside, seeing Dusty Drake and the gun, he began to swear softly under his breath.

"Shut up!" Drake snapped. "I'll do the talking. Austin, bring me that lariat I saw tied to your saddle."

Tommy got the lariat and brought it into the house.

"Tie him up, Doc," Drake ordered. "I don't want him jumping me while you're working on my leg."

Doc Biddle knew the score. His round face flushed with anger, he drew out a pocket knife and opened the big blade. Glaring at Drake, he cut the rope in half. Then he tied Tommy's hands behind his back with a length of rope and let the outlaw inspect the knots.

"That'll hold him," Drake said. "Now his feet."

Doc did a good job of tying Tommy's feet with the second half of the lariat.

"Drag him over to the other side of the room," Drake said.

Puffing, Doc heaved Tommy across the floor toward the front door.

"Comfortable?" he asked, helping Tommy to a sitting position.

"Yeah," Tommy answered. For the first time he had a ray of hope. Doc had made a pretense of snapping the blade shut and dropping the knife into his pocket. But when he'd lifted Tommy to a sitting position, he'd slid the handle of the knife between Tommy's fingers.

IT WAS a terrifying thing, watching the doctor and Mary working on Drake's bad leg, while the killer, the sweat popping out on his face, sat in the rocking chair, with Julie on his lap, the gun pressed against her back. Tommy was so angry he sometimes forgot to saw at the ropes that bound his wrists.

At last, after a thousand years, Doc straightened and said, "That's the best I can do for you."

"So far, so good," Drake said. His face was as white as chalk, but he was still calling the shots. "Now we'll all take it easy till it begins to get dark."

Tommy's hands were free, but there was nothing he could do except sit there, listening to the rain, while a numbness crawled up along his legs. He couldn't keep his eyes off the gun that Drake kept aimed at Mary, who now cradled the baby in her arms. There was no way of guessing what a man like Dusty Drake would do. He was a wounded, cornered beast, thinking only of saving his own neck. The suffering of others didn't count.

At the first signs of darkness, Drake shoved to his feet and took a few hobbling, experiment steps. "You did a good job," he said to the doctor, who sat on a chair near a window, looking tired, angry and helpless. Then Drake turned on Mary. "Put the kid down."

Mary obeyed. She looked sick. She had about reached the breaking point, and that scared Tommy. She might do something that would get her hurt.

"Here's the deal," Drake said. "I'm riding away on Austin's horse, and I'm taking the kid with me as insurance that nobody will do anything to stop me. If everything goes all right, I'll leave her with some people I know and they'll get in touch with you. But if anything goes wrong—"

Mary leaped to her feet and reached for Julie. But Drake flung her back against the wall and she fell to her knees. After that she seemed unable to move or speak or cry.

"You can't take the baby out in this rain," Doc Biddle protested angrily. "She already has a cold."

"She's my kid," Drake said flatly. "I can do as I please with her."

"Yours?" Doc said hoarsely. "I don't believe it."

Drake laughed shortly. "Ask Mary, my ex-wife."

He scooped Julie up under one arm and limped to the door. He had both hands full, so he slid his gun into the holster and reached out to turn the key. That was the break Tommy had been waiting for. He flung himself toward the man and lost the knife. But he kept rolling, and wrapped his arms about the man's legs.

Cursing, Drake let Julie slide to the floor, and Mary caught her up and swung her out of harm's way.

Drake lifted his gun, but Tommy managed to throw him off balance. The killer went down, cursing and fighting.

Tommy, with his legs bound, didn't have a chance and he knew it. He could only hope that Mary would get out of there before Drake started shooting. He felt the man's knee smash against his chin, and could feel him squirming free. Tommy braced himself for the sledge-hammer shock of a bullet. But suddenly Drake stopped kicking, and a hoarse cry bubbled from his mouth as his body went limp.

"Mary," Tommy heard Doc Biddle say, "take Julie into the kitchen." Then, puffing mightily, he shoved to his feet and began to brush the dust off his clothes.

"It was careless of you, Tommy boy, to leave my knife there on the floor with the blade open," the doctor said, grinning faintly. "This coyote rolled over on it and got it stuck in his back."

Tommy stared at the dead man. All he could see of Doc's pocket knife was the handle, sticking out of Drake's back. He glanced at Doc and suddenly knew the old man hadn't been brushing dust off his clothes. He'd been wiping the killer's blood off his hands.

"Thanks, Doc," he said huskily. Then he stumbled into the kitchen to make sure that the girl and the baby were all right.

The sun shone brightly out of a cloudless sky the day of the wedding. Practically everybody, including kids and dogs, tried to crowd into the church to wish Mary and Tommy all the happiness in the world. A few days later the reward money for ending the career of Dusty Drake arrived. Folks never did know why Tommy and Mary refused to have any part of it. But Doc Biddle knew. And right off, he claimed the whole amount for himself.

Years later, everybody was surprised when Doc's will was read, for he'd left a thousand dollars to help Julie Mitchell Austin go to college. But, as they all agreed, it couldn't have happened to a nicer young lady.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 38)

1. Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.
2. Horseshoes.
3. Mouse colored or bluish gray (not dappled.)
4. Powder River.
5. (1) Scrub oak, (2) chokecherry, (3) the elms, (4) the cottonwoods or aspens, (5) the olive trees, (6) tall pines, (7) juniper, (8) the white oaks, (9) apple trees, (10) block walnuts, (11) "Nueces" (noo-ACEs) means "nuts," but in Texas refers to pecan trees.
6. Cream or creamy white.
7. Pack boxes or containers for horseback, mule-back or burroback packing. Usually made of rawhide, leather, wood, or heavy canvas.
8. Whisky.
9. Derringer.
10. Montana.

Cattle Branding

CATTLE branding is generally considered a device originated by the cattlemen of western United States, whereas actually its use has been traced as far back as 2500 B.C. Man has always had the desire to put his mark or symbol on his possessions, even going so far as to burning his brand into the hides of his slaves, as well as his cattle.

The first branded livestock to be introduced into America came ashore with Hernando Cortez in 1518. The 16 warhorses which landed with Cortez were the first horses to be seen in the new world, and each one of those ponies bore one of three brand marks.

During the early open-range days, the branding of cattle was a matter of necessity, as the animals often wandered miles from the home ranch and mixed with other herds. The ranchers were forced into using a means of identifying their own cattle. While various methods were used, the burning of one's brand into the cattles' hide seems to have been the most popular.

Earlier brands were applied with a "run-

a Fact Feature

By BURTON L. WOLLENZEIN

ning iron," a device which resembled a straight poker with a curve at the lower end. After being heated in a fire, this iron was used to draw the mark like a picture, and each brand would be slightly different. Often these running iron brands were spread-eagled over the entire side of the animal. But such brands were much too sloppy and too easy to duplicate.

The shortcomings of the running iron brand, and the simplicity with which it could be duplicated or altered by not-too-honest neighbors, brought into being the "stamp brand" or "set brand." Such brands consisted of a rod with the design of a brand fashioned at the end of it. With this, a cowman simply stamped the hot iron onto the rump of his animal. In one motion the mark was burned into the hide, and the brand was exactly alike on each one of his cattle.

When the stamp brand came into popular use, with each cattleman having his own mark, the registration of these individual brands was recorded in state or county brand books. At this time, many of the cattle states passed laws which made it a criminal offense to be caught with a running iron in one's saddle bag.

Possession of such an iron was considered ample evidence of intent to rustle or to alter someone else's brand. But the enterprising cattle rustler soon discovered that brand-blotting could be done, just as successfully, by substituting a saddle cinch ring for the outlawed running iron.

In the earlier days of the West, the cattlemen did not worry too much about rustlers, or industrious neighbors anxious to build up their own herds regardless of where they got their stock. Cattle at that time were often marked in as many as six different places, sometimes using a different brand in each spot.

Later, when cowhide prices went up in value, the rancher could no longer afford to ruin the hide by too much burning. This started the practice of branding just once, usually on the left rump or slightly under the left rear leg near the belly. It also made things easier for the brand-blotter.

While many explanations have been given for branding on the left rather than the right side of the animal, probably the best reason is our unconscious habit of reading and writing from left to right. It is also more natural to read or write a brand if it is written toward the stern of the animal. While this reasoning was particularly applicable to the running-iron method of branding, it is believed that the habit was more or less automatically continued when the stamp irons came into general use.

On the ranch, branding was usually done by applying the hot iron while the animal was held immobile in a branding chute. Out on the range, where no such facilities were available; the calf was thrown with a rope and then hog-tied with short lengths of rope or rawhide before being branded.

An unbranded cow or steer, or a motherless calf, was known as a "maverick," and was customarily claimed by the first man to slap his mark on the animal. A certain Texas cattleman furnished the name given to such animals. This gentleman owned a ranch located on an island a short way out in the Gulf of Mexico.

SITUATED as he was, there seemed to be no reason for branding his cattle. But some of his unbranded cattle refused to cooperate, and took to wandering over to the mainland at low tide. This happened quite often and, while some of the ranchers returned the straying animals, others built up their herds by slapping their own brand on the strays. The rancher's name was S. A. Maverick.

When the ranchers began to put just one brand mark on a hide, they really gave the rustler his chance. Many brands could be altered by a skillful rustler with a running iron or cinch ring, so that from the surface the alteration was impossible to detect.

There were two ways in which an altered brand could be detected. One was the chance that the brand-blotter might have slipped with his running iron, making two lines where there should be only one. The second was by killing the animal and skinning it. From the underside of the skin, the original imprint showed up darker than the alteration.

The boldness of the rustlers, and the frequency of their cattle-snatching, angered the ranchers, who often found that the courts were a bit too lenient with convicted cattle thieves. If and when the ranchers could catch a rustler,

they often side-stepped the law and either lynched or shot the cattle thief.

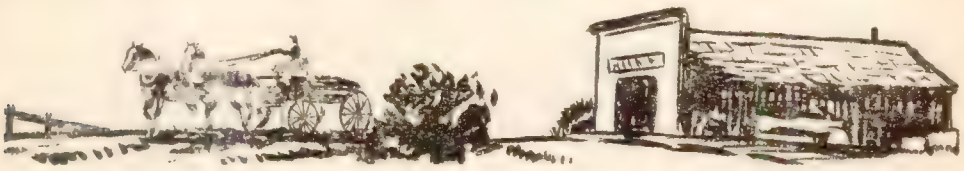
The ranchers also tried to make their brands in such a way that they would be hard to alter. In doing this they gave the rustler a real challenge, which many of them were quick to take up. The alterations made on some of the really tough brands were pure genius on the part of the running-iron artist.

Because branding has played such an important part in cattle ranching, the cattleman seldom said he was ranching, but more frequently declared that he was "running a brand."

A cattleman's brand was a personal thing, often with a special significance to him. It might be his initials or his name. It might refer to the initials of his girl friend, a special event in his life, or even a sentimental memory.

Although the days of the open range are a thing of the past, the cattle rustler still lives on. Today's cattle rustler does not use a running iron, nor does he generally rustle cattle on the hoof. His methods are more modern. He uses a high-powered truck to haul away the carcass, minus the hide with its telltale brand mark.

In spite of present-day registered brands, fenced ranges, herds being checked by riders using horses, airplanes and jeeps, as well as the threat of more rigid law enforcement, the present-day cattle rustler must find it a lucrative profession, for a great deal of it is still being done. Could it be the high price of beef steaks?



Coming up in the next issue

BORDER BREED

The rustling around Oro Blanco was getting worse . . . and a man like Tom, who made his own laws, could not escape suspicion

A Magazine-Length Novel

By RAY G. ELLIS

AMBUSH CANYON

Walt Kincaid had only one purpose in life . . . to kill Drumgold before the attacking Indians had a chance to kill them both

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By JACK BARTON

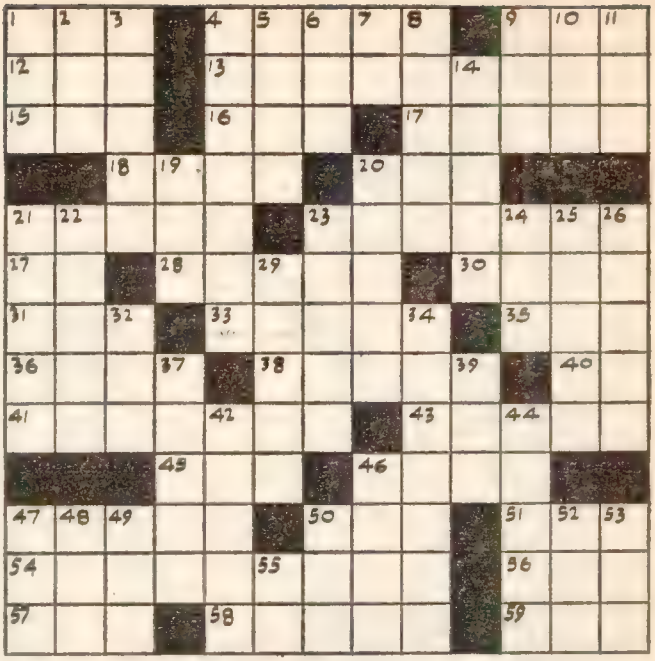
WOMAN ON HER OWN

The frontier wasn't easy, even for a no-nonsense girl like Kate . . . . but she'd take no help till she had proved herself

A Western Short Story

By J. L. BOUMA

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



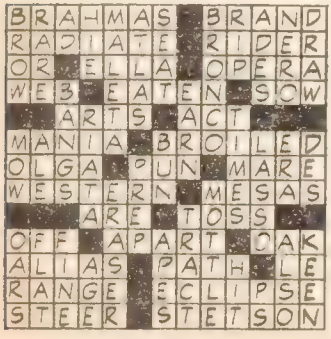
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 College cheer
4 Disgrace
9 Chum
12 A long time ——
13 Cowboys' refreshment place
15 For each
16 Before
17 Cowboy exhibition
18 Plant stalk
20 Large snake
21 Sheep's sound
23 Cattle enclosures
27 Rhode Island (abbr.)
28 Beneath
30 Sketched
31 Small insect
33 Lassoer
35 First woman
36 Recent information
38 Antitoxin
40 Intelligence Department (abbr.)
41 Fell
43 Intelligence
45 Hearing organ
46 Henrietta's nickname
47 Upright
50 My gal —
51 Chart
54 Cowboys' sleeping quarters
56 Organ of sight
57 Cot
58 To express contempt
59 Dad's room

DOWN

1 To knock
2 Number of years lived
3 Palomino
4 More sugary
5 Injury
6 Dined
7 Myself
8 Mistake
9 Seed container
10 Drink like beer
11 Man's name
14 To lay up a store of
19 Flap
20 Arbor
21 Owner's mark on cattle
22 Ocean vessel
23 Struggled successfully
24 Part of "to be"
25 Western trousers
26 Native of Sweden
29 One who loses
32 Pair
34 Cattle thief
37 Small spot
39 Encountered
42 Forest trails
44 Nominated
46 To make less difficult
47 To recede, as tides
48 To regret
49 Finish
50 To take legal action
52 Sailor's "yes"
53 Writing implement
55 Upon



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

Belle edged back toward the little bed where the child lay

RELUCTANT PIONEER

By LEOLA LEHMAN

TENSELY, Belle held little Laura close against her breast as she watched Jim stride out to the covered wagon and begin unloading. Then her eyes went over the bare walls of the log cabin, and suddenly tears blurred her vision. So this was to be their home, this log hut in the wilderness where they were surrounded by wild Indians who couldn't even speak English!

Belle shuddered. The Creek Nation in Indian Territory—even the very name of the place sounded wild and foreign. The wind beat and tore at the cabin, and loneliness seized her like a live thing. She hated the wind; in fact she hated everything about this strange country. But she must not let Jim know.

Belle fought her tears back and tried to

BELLE WAS TERRIFIED of living near these Indian savages . . . but it was a white man who brought death into her own house

push away the fear that struck at her when she thought of the Indians all around them. She had seen scarcely a dozen of them in all her sheltered life in Tennessee, but she had heard stories that chilled her blood. She had been told about white women taken as slaves, about babies kidnapped, about all kinds of murder and plunder. Jim said that was the plains Indians, but to her an Indian was an Indian, they were all a people apart. She would never understand why Jim wanted to live and work among them.

In all fairness, she had to admit the move down here should have been no surprise to her. When she married Jim, a medical student, she had known his intention of coming here to live and work. But as she stood there in the barren little cabin, Belle knew that deep down in her heart she had expected to change Jim's mind when the time came to leave their old home. Only it hadn't worked out that way. Jim, usually so gentle, had proved stubborn.

"You knew before we were married, Belle," he had said, and his eyes accused her. "This is what I've worked and planned for since I've been old enough to make plans. I *must* go."

And they did. Belle was determined to be a good wife to Jim anyway, but she knew it would be hard.

Laura squirmed and whimpered, and Belle realized how tightly she was holding the baby. She loosened her hold and patted the blanketed bundle.

"There, there, honey," she coaxed.

Laura sighed and relaxed. Then Jim came in with an armload of bedding, and from then on Belle was too busy to do anything except work.

But in the weeks that followed, and then the months, her fear of the Indians and of her new home stayed with her. She put no roots down. With Jim it was different, he went among the Creeks freely, and came home to tell Belle how honest he found them, and how friendly.

"They're not as different as you seem to think," he said. "You'd see what I mean if you would just try to know them."

Stung by Jim's reproach, Belle agreed. "Ask some of the women to come to see me, then."

Jim's thin face brightened, and he drew Belle to him. "Good girl," he murmured into her cloud of fair hair.

For a little while Belle forgot her fear and loneliness, forgot the unaccustomed work that roughened her hands and turned her body into one huge ache day after day. She even forgot the everlasting wind, as she cupped Jim's eager face in her hands and felt his lips search for and find hers. She wanted to be everything he wanted so much that it hurt, but it was hard. She drew back and smiled up at him.

"Just be patient for a little while, Jim. I'll be all right."

Next day Belle baked spice cookies and told herself over and over that she really wanted the Indian women to come to see her, that she was lonely and they would be company. But she knew that wasn't true.

Several days later she went out to hang some of Laura's little dresses on the clothesline. A tiny flutter of movement at the corner of the house caught her eye. Belle turned to look, and started violently. Four Indian women were standing there motionless, as though they had been around for a long time.

Her heart raced as she gripped the clothes basket close. She stared helplessly at the brown-skinned women. One of them carried a baby in a cradle board on her back, she noticed foggily. She wondered what they were going to do.

Then the women began to smile and chatter to her, and walked toward her. Belle had to fight not to back away. They had come to pay a visit! Relief swept over her, but she was angry at the same time. Why hadn't they come up and knocked on the door, instead of frightening her half to death by waiting for her to find them by chance?

She motioned them inside the cabin. Once there, her visitors looked around frankly, and chattered among themselves in their high, sweet voices. Belle caught words repeated, and recognized some as names. Sally was the one who carried the baby, and a lovely teenage girl was called Mahalie. Belle saw the girl's quick, gay smile, and wondered how she had ever had the idea that Indians were always frozen faced. She was surprised at her quick feeling of liking for the girl.

LAURA awoke from her nap and the women exclaimed over her, and wanted to hold her and touch her silky, blonde curls. They talked a mile a minute to one another, pointed from Laura's hair to that of the Indian baby, and laughed and laughed. Sally held her baby out to Belle.

"Charlie Mac," she said proudly.

Belle smiled nervously. Some of her uneasiness had come back at the interest her visitors showed in Laura, and she only nodded vaguely at Sally. Laura was such a pretty child, she thought almost anybody would want her. Tales of children being kidnaped and never seen again went through her mind in fitful snatches. She wished she knew what they were saying.

Almost snatching Laura away from Mahalie, she put her into bed again and started to make a pot of coffee. She got out the crock of cookies and a big plate. Then Mahalie was there beside her, helping, and smiling in her friendly way. Belle's warm feeling for the girl grew. If only she could speak English!

When Jim rode in, Belle was alone again. With an excited rush she told him of her visitors. "They almost frightened me out of my wits when I found them standing around out there," she complained. "Why didn't they come up to the door and knock like any civilized person would?"

Jim tried to keep his face straight, but failed. He threw his head back and roared. "I should have thought to warn you," he gasped. "That's just their way."

Belle forced herself to laugh a little, but what Jim had said struck her as the whole trouble. They *were* different. She liked to live near people she understood. Why couldn't Jim be like other men, satisfied to work among his own people?

She grew quiet, too quiet. And she saw the look of worry come and settle over Jim's thin face. It was a look she had seen there often lately, and she knew it came because of her rebellion against their life here in the wilderness. Wearily, she pushed her loneliness and fear away for a time, and tried to be gay.

After a while Jim was his usual smiling self again, and Belle was glad. But she lay awake a long time that night and listened to the steady beat of the wind against the cabin. The constant roar kept on and on, until she pulled the pillow over her ears to shut out the hateful, lonely sound of it. If only she had just one white woman for a neighbor, she could bear all the rest, she thought, as she drifted into restless sleep.

After that first visit the Indian women came often, and Belle knew they came out of kindness, but she could feel no closeness to them. They looked different, and their ways were strange. If she could understand them when they talked it would have helped, but she couldn't. Only Mahalie made halting efforts to learn English. After a while she could speak a few words.

Belle and Jim had lived in their new home for almost eight months the day the outlaw, Blackie Hawks, came by. Jim was away on a confinement case, and Belle was working bread dough, when a shadow darkened the doorway. Startled, she looked up. The smile that had begun to form on her lips froze.

A man, a stranger to her, lounged in the open doorway. An ugly smile twisted his thin lips as he glanced about the one room of the cabin, and Belle stared at him in sheer terror. She had seen before that long scar that gleamed from his chin to his ear, the greasy hanks of hair that fell across his forehead. Somewhere she had seen him. Then he looked back at Belle. His eyes went over her in insolent insult as he stepped inside.

"Where's your man?"

Heart hammering, Belle stepped back, her floury hands clenched at her sides. Laura awoke and began to whimper. The man's eyes flickered to the child and then went back to Belle. Belle's throat went tight. Now she remembered. This man's picture had been in the last weekly paper Jim had brought home. He was a murderer, wanted by the law in Oklahoma Territory. Her hand went to her throat. Every feature was the same in as the picture, even to his broken front tooth. She remembered that his name was Blackie Hawks.

"Well?" Blackie's crooked eyebrows lowered threateningly. "Where is he?"

Biting her lips, Belle motioned toward the back of the house. If she could trick him into going, she would get Jim's gun.

"You'll find my husband in the field behind the house," she managed in a thin voice.

With a smooth, animal-like glide, Blackie was beside her, had her wrist twisted in a hard grip. "Where is he?" he snarled. "I've been out back."

Belle gasped with pain. "He's away from home," she said, and stood rubbing her bruised arm after he shoved her away from him.

Laura began to cry, and Belle edged back toward the little bed where the child lay. Blackie's beady eyes followed every move she made. She was reaching for Laura when the outlaw's snarl stopped her.

"Get me something to eat, and don't try anything if you don't want the kid to get hurt."

THE next hour was a nightmare. Belle cooked ham and eggs and warmed a kettle of beans she had on the stove. She filled a heaping plate of the food and set it on the table. Blackie slouched down and began wolfing the hot food.

"Get me some bread," he ordered shortly.

Anger flared through Belle as she whacked three thick slices from her one remaining loaf of bread. For a moment she looked at the sharp knife in her hand, but dropped it with a clatter when she saw Blackie watching her. She slapped the bread down on the bare table and went over to quiet Laura.

Uneasiness bit at her. It was time for Jim to get home. If he came in on Blackie unprepared, he might do something rash, and then the outlaw would kill him. Jim would think the ground-tied horse outside was that of some Indian caller. Belle stole occasional glances toward the path. Twice Blackie looked up and saw her, and the last time he got up and peered out into the early afternoon sunlight.

"Expecting your man home, huh?" he growled. He turned and gave Belle a threatening look. "When he comes into the yard you'll keep still, or the kid's head gets bashed in," he said.

Belle's mouth went dry, and she shrank back. Laura began to cry in earnest. Blackie's brows drew together.

"Shut her up," he ordered.

Belle bounced the hungry, fretful little girl in her arms. Suddenly, then, all her thoughts were on the forest path. Jim was coming. She heard the familiar beat of his horse's hoofs at a distance. Her breath caught in her throat. If only Blackie failed to hear! Then her heart sank as the outlaw went tense and leaped to the side of the doorway. He jerked his thumb toward the cookstove.

"Get out of sight and stay out of the way," he ordered. Belle hesitated, and Blackie swore viciously. "Want me to shoot him down right now?" he grated.

Trembling, Belle moved over out of Jim's range of vision. Familiar with every step of the yard, she listened to his approach. He was past the protecting trees now, near the old walnut stump. Now he was opposite the well. In another minute he would be in the doorway, and Blackie's ugly black gun barrel would crash down on his head. Jim would never have a chance to defend himself.

Teeth clenched, she waited. Then Jim's step was on the hard earth outside the doorway. Blackie crouched, poised like a snake ready to strike. Belle's nerves snapped. Her breath came in hard gasps. Jim had to know what awaited him.

"Jim," she screamed, thinly. "Look out, Jim."

Jim's steps stopped and there was sudden, tearing quiet. Ugly fury twisted Blackie's face as he glanced at her and then back at the empty doorway. Belle shuddered at the promise of revenge in his slitted eyes. Then Jim's voice, hoarse with worry.

"What is it, Belle? Who's in there?"

Relief touched Belle even as she shrank back from a murderous glance from Blackie. Then she realized that Blackie dared not leave the doorway, and desperation gave her courage. She put Laura down in a chair and, with her heart hammering, grabbed up the pot of simmering beans and hurled them straight at Blackie.

Then everything happened at once. Blackie must have caught a flash of her movements, for he dodged. The pot missed him and slammed against the wall. The boiling beans bounced back in a steaming stream over his face and hands. With a gasping curse, he

dropped his gun and brushed frantically at the scalding beans. In the moment of confusion, Jim was inside and upon the outlaw.

The two men threashed about the little room. Laura screamed, Jim and Blackie panted and grunted under the hammering blows they traded, and Belle watched in frozen terror. If she and Jim came out of this alive, she would leave this place and never set foot here again. She flinched when Blackie's fist punished Jim with wicked blows to the face. But Jim held his own well. After what seemed an eternity, he slashed Blackie across the windpipe with the hard edge of his hand. Blackie went down like a stone and lay motionless. Jim stood over him gasping for breath.

Belle began to cry hopelessly, like a frightened child. Jim half staggered as he turned and glanced over to where she cowered near Laura. His cut lips twisted into a painful smile.

"It's all right, Belle," he said. "It's all over now. I'll just tie him up and take him over to the marshal in Oklahoma Territory."

But Belle's courage was all gone, now that the threat from Blackie was over. Big tears kept rolling over her cheeks as if they would never stop.

After Jim had the outlaw trussed tight as a Thanksgiving turkey, he came over and put his arms around her.

"It's all right now, Belle," he said gently. "Get hold of yourself. You're frightening Laura."

He picked up the shrieking child and put her in Belle's arms. Automatically, Belle patted Laura and hushed her until her screams turned to sad little sniffs. Then Belle turned to where Jim stood washing the blood from his face and hands.

Her whole body shook.

"Jim, I've had all I can take," she said. "I can't stay here any longer." Her voice rose and thinned, and Laura began to cry again. "Laura and I are going back to Tennessee. I've tried and tried to be a good wife, but I can't stay here." Her voice broke. "Come back with us to our own people, Jim. The Indians don't matter to us; they aren't your responsibility."

SOBS shook her slender shoulders as she held Laura close. Then Jim was beside her, pulling her into his arms.

"You're just upset, Belle," he pleaded. "You don't know what you're saying."

But Belle shook her head. "No. Blackie might have killed us before you got home today, Jim. I won't keep Laura where things like this can happen."

Jim's lean face was white and strained. "This could have happened in Tennessee or anywhere, Belle." His eyes searched her face. "Blackie is white, not Indian."

But Belle was beyond reason. "It's no use, Jim," she said. Her eyes stopped on the prone outlaw. "Get him out of here!" Hysteria rose in her voice. "Just get him out of here!" She pulled herself out of Jim's arms.

A few minutes later Jim led the bound outlaw out of sight down the forest path, and Belle sank down on the bed and cried until she could cry no more. Her life was over. There could never be anyone except Jim for her, but she could not stay here any longer. Jim would stay, she knew. For the thousandth time she wondered why it meant so much to him to stay here and work among the Indians, people so different from any he had ever known.

After a while she quieted down, fed Laura, and cleaned up the wrecked room. Tomorrow she would go away, but she would leave everything in order for Jim. She cried softly as she wondered how Jim would keep his clothes clean, and worried how he would get well-cooked meals.

When the little room was clean and shining, she began to pack her clothes and Laura's in her humpbacked trunk that had come down from Tennessee in the covered wagon. As she worked, she went over her life here in the Creek Nation. If only she'd had just one white woman for a friend, she could have stood the rest. But there were no white women.

Belle was so absorbed in her thoughts that she failed to hear soft footsteps approach. So when a low voice called out, she jumped and had to crush back a scream. Her heart hammered as she made herself go to the door. Then relief and a kind of anger swept over her. It was Mahalie.

Although Belle was unwilling to have her work interrupted by the strange, shy girl, there was nothing to do except invite her in. Inside, Mahalie looked about the empty room anxiously. Her slim hands twisted together, and it struck Belle that the girl was upset about something. She felt surprised, she had heard that Indians did not show their feelings. She offered Mahalie a chair, but the Indian girl shook her head quickly.

"Need doctor," she said, her big, dark eyes on Belle's face. "Charlie Mac need."

Belle shook her head. "The doctor's not here."

Mahalie's hand fluttered, and then gripped until her knuckles whitened. "Charlie Mac——urrrr," she made a gasping, rasping sound in her throat. Her eyes fastened on Belle's face.

Belle bit her lips as she stared at Mahalie, and her forehead creased in a frown. Once more the Indian girl made the rasping sound, and Belle felt the blood leave her own face. That was croup, and a bad case, or Jim would not have been sent for. She thought of the black-haired baby and how cute he looked, leaning against the wall in his cradle board, when Sally came to visit. His big eyes followed every movement in the room; otherwise, a person might have thought him a doll, he was so quiet.

Belle's throat hurt. Laura was always so pleased when Charlie Mac came. She always tried to get him to pat his fat little brown hands. Troubled, Belle shook her head. He really needed Jim—or some other doctor—but there was nobody else. Belle's eyes met the dark, questioning eyes of the Indian girl.

She shook her head. "Jim's not here, Mahalie. He won't be back for hours. I'm sorry."

Discouragement settled over the girl's face, and then her eyes widened, as Belle watched. She smiled for the first time. "You come?" she said.

Startled, Belle drew back. "Why, I—I can't," she began.

Pleading came into Mahalie's face, and desperation. "Charlie Mac bad." Her dark eyes never left Belle's face.

A wave of utter rebellion swept through Belle. These people were costing her her happiness with Jim, and still they were asking for her help. Another day and she would have been gone from here. Their trouble was not her trouble, and Mahalie had no business trying to shove it off on her. There was nothing she could do anyway; she was not a doctor.

But in the back of her mind she knew there was. Laura had had croup more than once when she was Charlie Mac's age, and Belle had worked side by side with Jim in helping her own child through the terrifying attacks. She knew every step with agonizing clarity. Abruptly, she knew that, willing or not, she had to go. She nodded, half angrily, to Mahalie.

"I'll go."

Mahalie's white teeth flashed. She busied herself preparing Laura, while Belle, wrote a note to Jim and gathered up the things she might need—a heavy sheet, turpentine, and some of Laura's outgrown shirts and outing gowns. In a few minutes they were on their way. Belle rode in the saddle and held Laura while Mahalie sat behind her and whipped up the sturdy buckskin. Half an hour later they rode into Sally's yard.

Sally came to the door, and Mahalie explained rapidly in their own language to the mother of the sick child. Sally smiled timidly at Belle. A twinge of shame struck Belle as she remembered her unwillingness to come. She hurried inside. There she looked nervously about.

IN ONE corner of the room little Charlie Mac lay. Each breath was a gasping effort, and Belle could see the struggle in his little chest as he fought to live. Her heart sank when she saw how his eyes rolled back in his head. Every difficult wheeze sounded like his last. She turned to Mahalie.

"Get some water boiling," she said, and motioned to the big teakettle on the stove.

Mahalie grabbed the kettle and hurried out to the well. Gingerly, Belle placed Laura on a cot and got busy. With the sheet she made a crude tent over the sick child. Sally tried to anticipate what Belle wanted done, and to help. She was so pitifully eager to do something for her child that Belle's throat

tightened. With all her heart she could understand how the other woman felt.

Belle pulled a chair near the bed. When Mahalie came to say the kettle was boiling, Belle told her to bring it over. The steaming kettle was brought to her and Belle set it on the chair so that the steam went under the sheet tent.

Sally watched intently, then hurried outside. A moment later she came back with a shallow iron pot. Lifting a stove lid, she filled the bottom of the pot with glowing coals and brought it over to the bedside. Belle saw what she had in mind, and helped her to set the live coals under the teakettle, so that there was a constant supply of steam gushing under the makeshift tent. Their struggle to save Charlie Mac's life had begun.

Belle worked, perspiration pouring down her body, until she thought she would drop. She lost track of the hours, even while she prayed aloud for Jim to get to them in time. She saw the same livid anguish in Sally's eyes that had been in her own heart when Laura had faced the same danger. She took time to put her hand on Sally's arm in comfort. The dark eyes that looked back into her own were those of another mother, torn by grief and fear, not a brown-skinned stranger whose language and ways were foreign to her.

Time passed. The coals cooled and were changed, then were changed again. For what seemed an interminable age, Charlie Mac's hoarse, labored gasps tore at Belle's heart. They went on and on, and then, all at once, they grew less severe.

Fearful that she was imagining the change, Belle's hand went to her throat as she listened. In that moment the most important thing in the world was that wheezing, gasping fight for air. It seemed impossible, but it was true. The little chest heaved more gently. Charlie Mac was better!

Trembling, she dropped to her knees beside the bed and listened. God, don't let me be wrong, she prayed, her throat hurting. There was no mistake, Charlie Mac was better. Belle's mouth trembled as she tried to smile up at Sally.

Their eyes met, and there was no need for words between the Indian mother and the fair-haired woman from Tennessee. Two big tears rolled down Sally's brown cheeks, and Belle's throat ached as she turned back to the child.

Hours later, Jim rode into the yard. By that time Belle was drinking coffee with Sally and Mahalie, and Laura and Charlie Mac were sleeping peacefully. There was a good feeling of comradeship in the little house. Jim's eyes went eagerly to Belle. Sleepily, Belle smiled at him.

"Charlie Mac is better," she said, simply.

Hope and fear of hoping swept over Jim's face as his eyes searched Belle's. But he said nothing, just went over and examined the sleeping Indian baby. When he turned to face the women again, he grinned.

"You ladies did a fine job," he said. "Charlie Mac will be as good as new in a few days."

As Jim and Belle left, Belle turned in the doorway and smiled serenely at Sally and Mahalie.

There was no feeling of strangeness between them now. Sometime during the struggle to save that tiny life all feeling of difference had melted away from her. She had realized the great bond between women everywhere, no matter what the color of their skins or what language they spoke. Sally and Mahalie smiled and waved to her.

Jim helped her up into the saddle, handed the sleeping Laura to her, and then swung up behind. Belle leaned her head back against his shoulder.

"The wind is soft as a feather tonight, Jim," she murmured. "I love the way it feels against my face. We must have lots of windows when we add another room to our house."

Belle was home at last, and Jim's strong hand came around to draw her to him in silent understanding

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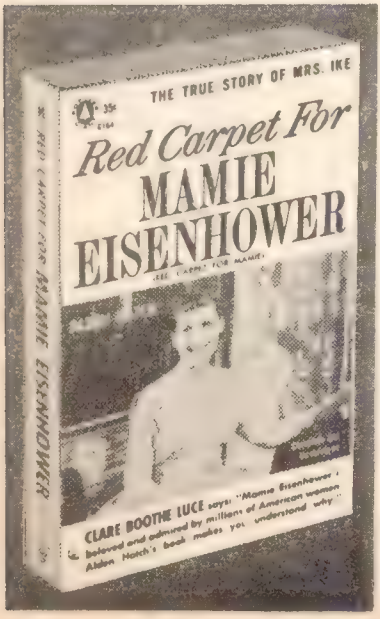

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The DRESSMAKER'S DUPE

By TEDDY KELLER

IT WASN'T that I was hard up exactly. It was just that I wasn't making much money, and I didn't want to be a two-bit rancher for the rest of my life. The way I figured, with five hundred dollars I could buy new breeding stock, and pretty soon I'd have my spread built up enough so I could ask Polly Wentworth to marry me. But banker McPherson didn't see it that way.

"Sorry, Martin," he said. He leaned back in his chair, put his feet on his desk, and lit a ten-cent cigar. "I just don't have five hundred to spare. Besides, that place of yours isn't worth that much."

"It is too," I said. "It's worth five times that much."

He shook his round bald head. "Not as a ranch. If you were growing corn or wheat, I might manage the loan."

"If I were growing corn or wheat," I said, "I'd already owe you more'n that, because they wouldn't grow out there."

"Martin," he said. Then he puffed smoke at the ceiling and gave me that smile as if he was telling me a cow has four legs. He said, "Martin, I don't put much stock in the ranching business. The cattle market isn't steady enough. Why don't you get into something solid, like growing wheat? People always need flour."

I said, "If five hundred's too much, how about one hundred? That'd get me started."

Just then the big old clock at the back of the bank started to strike. McPherson looked at it and jumped up.

"Good heavens," he said. He put out his cigar and grabbed his hat. "Six o'clock. My wife'll scalp me."

He was at the door before he remembered me. "Come on," he yelled. "I can't lock up with you in here. I have to get home so I can help with plans for the dance."

"But Mr. McPherson," I said, "what about that loan?"

"Will you come on?" His face was red, and he looked fit to bust. He said, "The matter is closed. I can't lend you anything."

Well, I got out of his way and went down to the cafe. I made a cup of coffee last me an hour. That was easy, because the cafe wasn't busy on weekdays. Usually I didn't go to town except on Saturday; but when I had heard about that breeding stock, I couldn't sit still through another whole day. And it gave me an excuse to call on Polly.

While I was sipping the coffee I gave the town and lots of its folks a good cussing. In any other town I'd've gotten my loan easily. But not in Silver Creek.

Silver Creek's a thousand miles from nowhere. It has no railroad, no newspaper, and just a once-a-week stage and freight line. Almost everybody there worked hard at farming or ranching or business—all but the McPhersons. I figured they probably hadn't amounted to a hill of beans, back East. But he had managed to buy some cheap land, sell it high, and get enough money to start his bank.

Mrs. McPherson appointed herself social leader, and before long all the other women had fallen in line. In a small town that meant that if the leader painted her nose black, the others might object and call her names, but pretty soon they had black noses, too. Ex-

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IF I MADE FOOLS of all the women in town, Polly would hate me . . . but if I didn't tell what I knew, I'd lose her anyway

I was going to keep Polly in town, or bust trying. . . .

cept that, actually, too many of their noses tended to be uppity.

Finally it was seven o'clock, and I finished the cold coffee and headed over to the parsonage. Polly was waiting in the doorway, and I forgot about banks and cows and dollars and everything.

She was a small girl; even with her blonde hair piled up on top of her head she only came about to my shoulder. Her waist was no bigger than my fist, and her features were like a doll's. But inside she wasn't small. She could ride a horse and shoot a gun, and she was spunky as a bulldog.

But this time, when I got close enough, I could see that something was wrong. She looked as if she had been crying, or was about ready to cut loose. And it hit me that, whatever she could do with a horse or a gun, she was still a woman. Not that I objected.

"I'm sorry, Will," she said, pushing open the screen door, "but I can't go to the dance tomorrow night."

"You can't?" I said. "How come?"

She came out the door and leaned back against the jamb. "I just can't," she said. "I have nothing to wear."

Right then she was wearing a bright, crisp calico dress that made her look good enough to eat. I said, "What's the matter with that one?"

"You don't understand," she said, her eyes big and hurt. "Every girl and woman in town has bought a new dress this week from Herbert Smythe."

"Who's Herbert Smythe?" I said.

"Why, he's the most famous dressmaker in the whole country," she said. "Probably even in the whole world. And he has trunks full of the latest-fashion styles."

"A man," I said, "makes dresses?"

She finally smiled at that. She said, "Why, of course, silly."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't buy one," I said.

And I was. It didn't seem fit that a man should be fussing with needles and lace and such and—well, measuring women for dresses.

"I'm not," she said, and the smile was gone. "Don't you see, Will? Everybody's going to the dance tomorrow, and all the women will be in new gowns. I just can't wear something old."

THE way she looked then, I felt as if I had just pulled a dirty trick on her. I didn't know much about girls, but I sure knew she had her little old heart set on a new dress. And I knew her father didn't make much money. I put a hand in my side pocket and tried to figure out how much cash was there.

"Well," I said, "if it's money that's stopping you—"

"Oh, no," she said quickly. She smiled again, appreciatively, but that faded too. She said, "I have enough saved up. But Daddy said if I bought one of those dresses he wouldn't let me out of the house in it. He said if I tried, he'd thrash me."

"And that's just what I'd do," the parson said. He came out on the porch and nodded to me. He was a spare man, not very tall, with a thin face which he had a hard time keeping stern, because he liked to laugh. "Evening, Will," he said.

"Evening," I said. "Isn't that kind of drastic punishment? I mean, Polly's not a kid any more."

He let himself grin just a little. He said, "If you saw one of those dresses, you'd agree with me. They're scandalous."

"And a man fits 'em, too," I said.

"All right," Polly said. "I'm not going to buy a dress from Mr. Smythe, and I'm not going to the dance. Just let it go at that and don't make it any worse."

"Huh?" I said.

"I'm afraid she means me," Reverend Wentworth said.

"I certainly do," Polly said. She faced me and she looked worried. "He's going to preach about those dresses on Sunday."

"He's what?" I said.

"Maybe not," Reverend Wentworth said. "Only if our building drive falls short. If it does, of course, I'll have no choice."

"Of course," I said. Then it hit me. "You mean you'll stand up there and call 'em sinners on account of their glad rags?"

"He sure will," Polly said. "And you know what that means."

I shuddered. "Yeah. Sunday afternoon they'll tell you to move, and by Monday a new preacher will be on the way here."

"I haven't preached about the dresses yet," the parson said. "If those women have any sense, I won't have to."

"If you mean Mrs. McPherson and Mrs. Bond and Mrs. Lassiter and those others," I said, "you might as well start packing. They haven't any sense."

"Then you'd better tell me good-bye, Will," Polly said.

The reverend gave her a patient smile and then said to me, "Won't you agree that there are times when a man must put principles before his personal comfort? Doesn't a man need to stand up for what he believes in? Silver Creek has needed a new church for ten years. Now the money our families have pledged is being spent for those dresses."

"Well, sir," I said, "when you put it like that I guess I know what you mean. I guess everybody has troubles."

"Even you, Will?" the parson said. "I didn't suppose anything worried you."

So I told him about the cows, and how I could make my spread a big ranch if McPherson'd lend me the money.

"Now that *is* too bad," Reverend Wentworth said. "A rancher over near Pawnee gave us a bull and three cows to help our building fund. I was hoping we could sell them to you."

"Not to me," I said. "Sorry."

"I know you are," he said. "You've helped already. But I'll tell you what I'll do. You figure out a way to raise our last thousand dollars, and I'll give you that stock."

He grinned at me and I grinned right back. "Thanks," I said. "If I could get that much money, I'd give it to you right now—just so you wouldn't have to preach about those dresses and get run out of town. I'd sure hate to see you leave."

"You would indeed," the parson said, chuckling a little. "The fact that Polly'd be leaving too isn't important."

He grinned wider, put his hand on my shoulder, then went on inside the house. Polly looked at me as if she had just dug her own grave and planted the flowers. I took her hand and led her over to the steps, and we sat down. She sighed, hung on to my hand, and tilted her head over to lean it on my shoulder.

"We have to figure out something," I said.

"What?" she said.

"I don't know," I said, "but you sure can't leave Silver Creek."

She didn't say anything. She just sighed again and kind of snuggled up against me. I put an arm around her waist.

"Look," I said. "How about if we went around and told those ladies their dresses aren't as important as a new church?"

"And have Mrs. McPherson be the only one in a new dress?" Polly said. "They'd all be humiliated."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess so."

"There just isn't any way to stop them," she said.

It seemed hopeless to me, too. There isn't anything more mulish than a bunch of women with their minds made up. I could picture Reverend Wentworth preaching at them on Sunday, him and Polly leaving town, and me being a two-bit rancher till Doomsday, pining away for her all the time.

There was only one nice thing about it. The unhappier I got, the tighter I hugged Polly. She seemed to be doing the same. And if there's anything finer than sitting on the porch steps under a summer moon and hugging and getting hugged by a pretty girl, I sure don't know what it is.

BUT then the parson started clearing his throat. Polly pulled away from me and sat real stiff. I stood up, pulled her up too, and said a lot of foolish things about how it'd all work out. All of a sudden she reached up and kissed me, then went tearing into the house as if I'd bitten her.

Well, that sample was just too darn nice. I decided right then that I was going to keep Polly and her father in town, or bust trying. This kissing business was fun. I aimed to try some more of it.

I moseyed over to the schoolhouse. Right away I could see that something special was going on. The older ladies like Mrs. McPherson didn't drag their husbands to shindigs unless they had a new dress or some new gossip, because they didn't want to give their husbands a chance to dance with the pretty young girls. But this time it looked as if everybody in town was on the dance committee.

All the men were moving desks and tables, and stacking them in a corner. The women were hanging colored paper and stuff all over the place. It figured to be the fanciest stomp Silver Creek had ever seen.

Pretty soon a stranger came in with a package under one arm, and all the women crowded around him. He must be the dressmaker, Herbert Smythe. He looked kind of fussy, but he was taller than me, and very elegant with all his bowing and his talk. I reckon the ladies thought he was handsome. He looked hungry, though, I thought.

He said something about Mrs. McPher-

son's dress being ready, and untied the package. The ladies squealed as if he'd let loose a dozen mice. Mrs. McPherson grabbed that green tent and held it up to her. I could imagine how she'd look in it.

It reminded me of having once seen a butcher squeeze a sausage in the middle till the ends popped open. That's how Mrs. McPherson'd look. Her big flabby arms and shoulders and half her chest would be bare. The dress was cut way down, and was covered with spangled doo-dads.

When I was in Dodge City once I peeked in a dance-hall and saw those gaudy girls. But, I swear, they didn't wear anything worse than Mrs. McPherson's dress.

Then it hit me like a kick in the shins. Nobody in Silver Creek ever traveled much, except over to Buffalo Flat or maybe up to Pawnee. And nobody much came to town, either. We had no newspaper, only Mrs. McPherson claiming to know what went on in the rest of the world. I figured the last time I was in Dodge was the last time in years that anybody from this town had been in a real city. They just didn't know.

But I sure did. This Herbert Smythe might have those ladies believing their dresses were the latest style, but I knew better. Those dancehall girls in Dodge had worn the same kind of duds. The only difference was that the dancehall girls had the right shapes to fit the dresses.

I just about burst out laughing. But I remembered about those mulish women, and I kept my mouth shut. Right then I knew what I had to do. I eased out of there, and I laughed all the way down to the hotel. Old Ed Mowbry, the desk clerk, must have figured nobody was coming, and had taken off for the schoolhouse, there was nobody around in the hotel lobby.

I could tell, by the way the dust had been stirred around in just one pigeonhole, that only one room was occupied. So I took that key and unlocked Number Four, then put the key back and went into the room. But Smythe had rented two adjoining rooms. One he'd fixed up as a fitting room, and the other one was where he slept and kept his trunks and things.

That's where I went. He had blankets covering all the trunks, and that was smart—because every one of them had the words "Smythe's Theatrical Troupe" painted on it. Naturally, that just about tied everything up for me. I nosed around in the trunks, saw what was left of the costumes, and wondered what he'd do with the real skimpy ones—the ones with no more to them below than above.

But that was his worry. I found his cigars, lit one, and sat down on his bed to wait. But the cigar smelled like a burnt-down livery stable, so I threw it away. Then I just had to sit and wait. And I waited a long time. I don't know whether it took that long to fix up the schoolhouse, or if he went to somebody's house afterward, but it was almost eleven o'clock before he came in.

I didn't bother turning out the lamp or trying to hide or anything. I just sat there bold as brass when he walked in. It stopped him for maybe a second.

Then he smiled, waved a hand, and said, "Good evening. I suppose you've come to buy a dress for some lucky girl."

"No," I said, getting up off his bed. "I've come to wring the neck of a conniving four-flusher."

HE GLANCED over to his uncovered trunks, and the smile kind of broke to pieces and fell off his face. For a minute I thought he'd cut and run. Then he smiled again, shakily, and closed the door behind him. He took a long time lighting a cigar, and I knew he was trying to get his temper down and his courage up.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me," he said at last, coming over to me and putting out his hand. "I'm Herbert Smythe."

"Will Martin," I told him.

I shook his hand cautiously. All this time, he was measuring me up and down. I figured he was trying to decide whether he ought to try to beat me up. So I bore down on the handshake. That decided him against it.

"Well, now." He backed away a step and gave me his toothy smile. "What's this all about? Or did you come here to audition for a play-acting part?"

"I thought you were a dressmaker," I said.

He didn't even flinch. "That was fast," he said. "You are not a country bumpkin."

"I've been to Dodge City," I said, "and I've seen the dancehall girls."

"Ah, yes," he said. "You're a man of the world."

"A man of this world," I said, "which you won't be a part of much longer if you don't cut the sass."

"And," he said, "a man of courage and conviction."

"I am," I said, "a two-bit rancher who doesn't want the parson to be leaving town."

"I'm tired of living in this hole in the wall."

His smile was wise. "Ah, yes. Polly Wentworth. She came to see my wares, but she didn't buy. What a lovely girl! I can see why you wouldn't want her father to depart this fair city. But what has that to do with me?"

"You're not a dressmaker," I said, "you're a play-actor."

He bowed.

"You went broke in the last town you played."

He turned a pocket inside out. It was empty.

"So you came here and cleaned up by telling the silly women that your costumes were the latest styles."

He rubbed his hands together and gloated.

"And now you and I are going to make the rounds and tell the ladies just what kind of clothes they're wearing. If we don't, they'll squander all their husband's money, and the parson'll call 'em sinners, and they'll run him out of town."

Smythe just stared at me while I said that last part. Then he choked on his cigar and burst out laughing fit to split his pants. He slapped his leg and haw-hawed and ho-hoed until he was so weak he had to sit on one of his trunks.

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to get sober. "I can see the predicament I've put you in with Polly Wentworth and her father. But I'm afraid your solution isn't practical. Besides, the money is already squandered, as you put it."

"Yeah?" I said. "Maybe you want me to bounce you off the walls for awhile."

He puffed at his cigar. "That might satisfy your anger, but it wouldn't help you and Polly."

"Why not?" I said.

"Mr. Martin," he said, "people—especially women—don't like to be told they've been played for fools. Oh, we could go around and confess the deal, and even return the money. And I have no doubt that until their dying day these women would despise the thought of me. But they'd hate you even more for proving to them that I made fools of them."

"But I didn't sell the dresses," I said.

"Of course not," he said. "But if you insist upon exposing me in this manner, you might just as well leave town when I go. Certainly no woman will ever speak to you again—not even Polly. She won't be hurt directly, but she'll suffer for her sex."

"Be careful what you say," I said.

"Sorry," he said. "But really, friend, I wasn't completely heartless. I sold dresses only to women whose husbands could afford it. Like McPherson, the banker. His wife took five dresses at a hundred dollars each. He'll never miss the money."

"Five hundred dollars?" I said. "For dresses?"

Smythe grinned. "Quite. She wants to be the town's social leader, you know. She

didn't want many dresses left for the other ladies."

I couldn't say anything. All I could think of was what that money could have done for me. The thought made me kind of sick.

"If it'll make you feel better," Smythe said, "I'm quite willing to cross your palm with some eloquent salve. Call it a reward for your ingenuity, or a commission for your not talking out of turn before I leave town."

"I don't know," I said. "I guess maybe it wouldn't be right."

Smythe took out a roll that would've damned a good-sized creek. "I don't need it all," he said. "Help yourself."

I could see fat, sleek cattle on my range, a bigger house with Polly waiting at the door, fine horses in the corral, and all sorts of things. I could almost feel the money in my hand.

Then, like a loco fool, I said, "I reckon not."

"You won't have another chance," he said, shoving the roll under my nose. "I'll be leaving on the morning stage."

"Thanks," I said, "but I'd better not." I got my feet moving and backed to the door. He was still holding out the money, and I was trying to get away from there. Then I got the door open and said, "No thanks. Good-bye." I ran all the way to the street.

I got my horse out of the livery stable and was on my way out of town when the idea hit me. I wondered why I'd been so dumb that I hadn't thought of it before. Who was the one man in town that could figure out anybody's troubles? Why, sure—Reverend Wentworth. He always knew what to do.

BY THE time I got around to the parsonage, the whole town was dark and everyone had gone to sleep. I sat the saddle and looked at the house. I figured if I were going to get the sky pilot out of bed, I'd better be all ready with what I wanted to say. So I thought about it a little. The more I thought, the happier I got. I could get the mess worked out for me, and at the same time I could deal Reverend Wentworth some high cards.

All I had to say, was "Parson, those are dancehall costumes. I know because—" No I couldn't say that. If he knew I'd even been close to a Dodge dancehall, he might make Polly stay away from me. No, I'd just say, "Parson, those are dancehall costumes." And he'd say— Gosh, what if he asked me how I knew? I couldn't just say I suspected Smythe; I'd have to have a better reason. But what? You don't go around suspecting people without a reason.

I must've sat there for half an hour. Then there wasn't anything to do but go home. It wasn't a very happy homecoming, and it wasn't a very sleepy night. I'd been dreaming about Polly too long to give up easily.

But nothing figured out right. I could talk to the parson but then he might forbid me ever to see Polly again, and I would lose her that way. Or I could show Smythe up as a four-flusher and everybody'd hate me, and I could lose Polly that way. Any way I worked it out I ended up wrong.

I finally got to sleep, and it must've done me some good, because when I woke up I had an idea. It didn't strike me as too good, but it just might work out, and show up the McPhersons and their fancy friends for the bunch of phonies they were. I had to hurry, though; I'd slept later than usual. The weekly stage left at nine o'clock, and I had an hour's ride to town.

By the time I got shaved, put away some breakfast, and hitched up the buckboard, it was going on eight o'clock. I pushed my horse hard, and we got to town about a quarter to nine. I went right to the hotel, to Smythe's room, and knocked like I owned the place.

He must've figured he was going to sell one more dress before he left, because he was all smiles when he opened the door. Then he saw me and didn't know whether to be mad or scared.

"Come in," he said.

I was already inside and closing the door. He was all packed, and I could see the money bulging his pocket.

"I thought we said good-bye last night," he said.

"Not quite," I said. I nosed around, mak-

ing him wait, and I could see that he was getting nervous. He even forgot to be polite.

"Well, what do you want?" he said.

"You," I said.

"What?" he said. "Wait a minute, Martin. What is all this? I offered to buy you off last night."

"Yeah," I said. "You tried to bribe me."

"What're you getting at?" he said.

I looked around some more, and then gave him a wise look. "Did you really think," I said, "that you'd get out of town with all that money and no trouble?"

"What do you mean?" he said. He started to shake a little, and he looked plenty scared.

"You hoodwinked a couple of dozen ladies," I said. "and they all have husbands."

"Most wives have husbands," he said, trying to be smart.

"And most husbands have bad tempers," I said, "when it comes to their wives spending money on clothes, and especially when it comes to their wives being cheated."

Smythe pulled out his watch and started fidgeting. "My stage leaves in twelve minutes," he said. "If I miss it I'll have to stay here another week."

"If you stay here another week," I said, "that's just seven more days that somebody might figure out what you did."

"Will you get to the point, man?" he yelled.

"You know," I said, "if I were one of those husbands I'd see that you left town pronto—riding on a rail, and all tarred and feathered to fit the occasion."

Smythe's face got the color of cold ashes. "You can't do that," he said.

"Why not?" I said. "There's a pot of tar in back of the mercantile for the new roof, and this town has chickens enough to feather a whole army."

SMYTHE looked at his watch again. He sounded like a condemned man pleading for his life. He said, "What do you want?"

"Before you can leave town," I said, "you have to get to the station and in the stage."

"The depot's just down the street," he said. "I can get there in a minute."

"Not if there are husbands in the way," I said.

"I have ten minutes," he screeched. "How much money do you want?"

"Oh, I couldn't take a bribe," I said.

"A hundred dollars," he said.

"That wouldn't be right," I said.

"Two hundred," he said.

"I have a conscience," I said. "I couldn't let you get out of town after you cheated all those folks."

"Two-fifty," he said. He was almost down on his knees. "And they deserved it, all of them. If they weren't all trying to put on the dog and outshine their neighbors, they wouldn't even have looked at those costumes. They need to be taught a lesson."

"It's a pretty expensive lesson," I said.

"Two seventy-five," he said.

"No," I said. "I couldn't accept a bribe. But what I want to know is how much money you've got invested in those dresses."

"Thousands," he said.

"As I told you last night," I said, "I can bounce you off the walls awhile. Or I can sit here and look through your records till I find what I want. I sure wouldn't find it before the stage left."

He got indignant. "My business matters are private affairs. I'll tell you nothing."

"Suit yourself," I said. "If you want to worry about tar and feathers for another week, just keep stalling."

He kept up his big front for about ten seconds. Then he looked at his watch and said, "All right. I had nine hundred dollars invested in those dresses. I took in a thousand."

"I have no place to go all day," I said. "I can wait for the truth."

"Damn you," he yelled. "All right. They cost me five hundred. I took in twelve hundred."

"How was that again?" I said.

"You heard me," he said.

"Not really," I said. "Your watch ticks too loud."

He cussed me and looked at his watch again. "Can't a man even make expenses?" he whined. He looked about ready to cry. Then he wilted. "All right. The dresses cost

me three hundred and I took in fourteen hundred."

"You're sure?" I said.

"Yes," he yelled.

"Okay," I said. "Keep the three and another hundred for your trouble. That'll be for those women's lesson. The thousand goes to the church."

Smythe doubled over as if I'd kicked him in the belly. His eyes got wide and I thought he was going to throw up. "You robber," he said. "You highway robber."

"Not exactly," I said. "I'm just collecting for a worthy cause. After all, we can't give the money back or folks'll know what happened. And you don't need it all."

"It's plain robbery," he said. "I won't pay."

"That's up to you," I said. "If you want to risk another week holed up here, you might even make it. But that tar'll be boiling all week."

Smythe took out his watch, and then starch drained out of him. He kind of shivered and didn't say anything. Then he took out the roll of bills and counted a thousand dollars into my hand.

"Thanks," I said. "Now one thing more. Take everything out of that big trunk except one dress and two or three of those little skimpy costumes."

"What's the idea?" he said.

"You're wasting your own time," I said. "Do you want to be on that coach or not?"

He didn't even take time to answer me. He dived into the pile of luggage and in about half a minute had the big trunk the way I wanted it. Then we started carrying stuff down and loading it into the buckboard. While he paid his bill, I arranged the stuff the way I had in mind.

HE CAME tearing out of the hotel as if he'd been caught stealing the bathtub, and climbed up beside me. "Five minutes," he said. "Let's go."

I got the horse moving and headed down toward the stage station. Smythe let out a big sigh. When I swung the rig off Main Street I thought he'd throw a conniption fit. Then I stopped fooling around with him.

"You just sit still and shut up," I said, "or I'll shut you up. We'll get there on time."

I flapped the reins and yelled at the horse. He leaned into the harness and we went flying in a big circle till we were clear up above the church and schoolhouse and back on the stage road. Then I slowed some and headed right back to town.

As we got close to the church, I leaned back and pushed the big trunk until one end hung over the tail-gate. Then, just as we were passing the church, I slapped the reins hard. The horse spooked and lunged, the buckboard jerked, and the trunk toppled off into the middle of the street. We almost went past the stage station, through the Saturday crowd and all, before I got that horse stopped.

Smythe had half his luggage on top of the coach before I could even get down from the buckboard. I helped him with the rest and boosted him inside. The driver cracked his whip, and Herbert Smythe was gone.

I moseyed over to the cafe and had some coffee. By the time I got up the street, everything was all taken care of. There must've been fifty people standing around that trunk, and they'd all seen the printing outside and the costumes inside.

Two women were sniffling, and one man yelled, "Get a rope."

Another hollered, "Let's tar and feather him."

Then Ed Mowbry from the hotel said that Smythe was gone and, oh, my, what excitement! Mr. McPherson took Mrs. McPherson by the arm and led her home. Some husbands started bellowing at their wives right there on the street.

Reverend Wentworth and Polly were on the church steps. They were both smiling. The parson winked at me. Polly rushed up to me and hugged me and kissed me.

I was blushing when I handed Reverend Wentworth the thousand dollars. But he acted as if it was nothing for Polly to be kissing me. He told me the cattle were in a feed lot south of town. Then he went inside.

The ranch was going to get some new stock, and I knew it wouldn't be long before I got a new wife. I was betting that Polly'd be one wife who wouldn't be nagging her husband for new clothes right away.

The Legend of Grand Mesa

a Fact Feature

By Phil Squires

LOCATED near Grand Junction, Colorado, and rising 5,000 feet above the valley floor to an elevation of 10,500 feet above sea level, is a large flat-topped mountain known as Grand Mesa.

This mesa, fifty-three square miles in area, with its three-hundred foot lava cap, its meadows, forests, animals, and its more than two hundred lakes and miles of mountain streams, was once the hunting ground of the Ute. To them the mesa was known as Thigunawat, or "home of departed spirits." The mystic beauty of this curiously detached upland seemed to them a perfect setting for the wandering souls of departed warriors.

According to the Ute legend, the mesa was the home of three pairs of great eagles, known as Bahaa-Nieche, or thunder birds. These birds nested along the north rim of the pleateau, and the white rock slides at that point on the slope are supposedly formed of bones and debris from their nests. Not only did these birds carry off such animals as deer and antelope, they often captured and carried off Indian children as well.

One day a Ute chieftain named Sehiwaq discovered that his son had been carried off by one of the great Bahaa-Nieche. So great was the father's anger that he determined to avenge the death of his son.

Sehiwaq disguised himself by wrapping himself in the bark of the Basthina, or red cedar tree. To the Ute the cedar was sacred for its never-dying green, its aromatic fragrance when burned at religious ceremonies, and its durability and fine texture, which made it ideal for lance shafts and tepee poles.

The Ute believed that the cedar had originally been a pole, at the top of which their ancestors had fastened the scalps of their enemies and that the heart of the tree had been stained red by the blood that soaked into its fibers.

As soon as Sehiwaq was thoroughly disguised in the bark of the red cedar tree, he started climbing the side of the mesa. It took him all day to scale it, as the climb was hard and he had to stop often. Whenever a thunder bird soared over him, he stood very still and pretended to be a tree.

Finally he reached the thunder birds' nest, pulled out the young birds, and sent them tumbling down the slope. A large serpent, Batiqtuba, lived near the foot of the slide. As the eaglets rolled near him, he snatched up and devoured them.

When the great Bahaa-Nieche returned to their nests and saw what had happened, they suspected Batiqtuba. Swooping down on the serpent, they seized him in their talons, carried him many miles into the air, and tore him to pieces.

As the pieces fell to earth, they made deep pits in the ground. So great was the rage of the thunder birds that fire streamed from their eyes and thunder shook the mountain. Then the rain came down in torrents and filled the pits, forming the many lakes on the mesa.

THE BEST bareback bronc-rider in the country, Eddy Akridge, has won the championship three times in a row. He's a handsome young man with a happy-go-lucky air, except when he's astride a bronc. Then he's all business.

His attitude toward rodeo in general is all business, for that matter. He's heard a lot of applause and he's been presented with lots of trophies, but he sees nothing very glamorous in what he's doing.

Probably the reason that rodeo lacks glamour for him is that he grew up in it. He was born on a ranch near Pampa, Tex., but his father was a rodeo hand, and Eddy hit the rodeo circuit when he was just a youngster.

"I found out early about rodeo's hard knocks," he says. "I realized when I was still a kid that there are more failures in the game than there are big money-makers, and there are more hardships than applause."

He was not, however, sufficiently disillusioned not to want to take a shot at some of that big money himself. Ten years ago he entered his first amateur rodeo in Meade, Kansas. All through that year and the next he stuck with the small shows. Then in 1948 he joined the RCA and tried to get into the big time.

He was a young man in a hurry, and he wasted no time. In 1949 he took top money in four of the biggest U. S. rodeos, and he won the bareback and all-around championships at the Calgary Stampede in Canada. He continued steadily on his winning way, and by 1952 was sixth in the list of bareback riders. The next year he won the bareback championship, and also came in fourth in All-Around. That year, 1953, was Eddy's best. He carried away trophies, saddles, and cash from New York, Boston, Phoenix, Pendleton, Ellensburg, Walla Walla, as well as dozens of smaller rodeos.

Eddy is married and has two children, Eddy, Jr., who is three and a half, and Donna, six. Once in a while his family goes rodeoing with him, but usually his wife, Barbara Mae, feels she can keep a sharper eye on the children if they stay home in Hesperia, Calif.

For relaxation, Eddy likes to play golf and to swim. He's one of the few top-hands we know who doesn't have any plans for retiring on his own ranch some day.

Just recently he's had one other iron in the fire, though. He's always enjoyed singing and strumming his guitar, but it was strictly for pleasure. And then he was invited to run through a song or two on Herb Shriner's show. The next thing you know, he'd made a record. On one side he sings "What Can I Do?" and on the other it's "Consolation Prize." The disc should be at your record store now, on a *Capitol* label, in case you want to hear how a championship bareback rider sings.

In the arena he also competes in saddle bronc-riding, and sometimes in calf-roping and bull-riding. Bareback, naturally, is his favorite event, but he thinks it's also the hardest one. He believes that a greater sense of balance is needed for bareback riding.

Eddy has only three nominations for the Hall of Fame, as far as animals are concerned. One is a Christensen bull named Life, another is "the best bareback bronc I ever rode," Harley Tucker's Ranchways. The third is the famous Miss Klamath (also Christensen's). She was the saddle bronc, you'll remember, who was only ridden once, (last year, by Bill Ward) and a week later broke both hind legs and had to be destroyed.

Eddy was thrown from all three of these buckers. "If I *can* ride a bronc or a bull," he says modestly, "naturally I wouldn't think it's a great one."

Adios,
THE EDITORS

"Why were you afraid of the others?" Doug asked.

FIVE GRAVES WEST

By PHILIP KETCHUM

THE STORY SO FAR: DOUG CALLANDER learns from lawyer IRV COZAD that his father SAM had stampeded his neighbor ROGER QUIGLEY's cattle, and had been killed while resisting arrest for this crime. Doug refuses to believe it, but his investigation proves it's true. He also learns that Quigley is ready to kill him if he does not sign over the Callander ranch to Quigley. Doug is contacted by one of his father's men, ANDY RAWLS, who explains the provocation that drove Sam to his crime. Quigley's men, led by VIC LEIGHTON, had ambushed eight of Sam's cowboys on a trail drive, and stole the thousand head of cattle. The graves of five of the men have been found, but the other three men may still be alive and able to give evidence against Quigley; and the remainder of Sam's men are searching for these three. While waiting for Sam's men to return from the search, Doug plans to strike back at Quigley by helping his unhappy wife, FRAN, to escape.

PART THREE

THE cook was still standing just inside the room. Doug walked that way. He picked up the rifle the cook had dropped, set it against the wall, and said, "I have a horse tied in the trees along the creek, straight back of the house. I want you to bring it here. And don't get any ideas while you're doing it. You make a big target."

"I'll get your horse, Mr. Callander," the cook promised. He hurried from the room.

Doug walked to where Fran crouched at the side of the man he had shot. He knelt over the man, but could see almost instantly that there was nothing to be done. He stood up then and, taking Fran by the shoulders, pulled her to her feet. She looked pale, and was shaking.

"I'm sorry about what happened, Fran," he said earnestly, "but sometimes things like this can't be helped. Was he someone special?"

"No, but he was nicer than most of the others who work here. I wasn't afraid of him."

"Why were you afraid of the others?"

"I wasn't really afraid of anyone until—until two nights ago."

"What happened then?"

She backed away, shaking her head. "I don't want to talk about it. I thought you were going to get me out of the basin."

"I'll take you to the stage line west of Waggoner."

"We'll never make it."

"We'll make it easily," Doug said. "We'll slant across the basin toward Unitah Pass. After dark we'll swing south to the Springerville road. If anyone is following us, they'll keep on to the pass, sure we are headed that way."

"But you don't know what Roger Quigley is like. You don't know what's driving him. He'll never stop following us."

"What *is* driving him, Fran?"

"Fear."

She shook her head, turned, and hurried to her room to make up a package of the few things she wanted to take with her. Doug waited, aware of a growing impatience to get away.

"Ready to ride?" he asked when she joined him on the porch.

The cook was holding his horse, and the other horse which had been tied to the corral fence. Doug took the package from Fran's hand. It was rather heavy. He tied it in back of the saddle of the horse she was to ride, helped her to mount, then adjusted the stirrup lengths to suit her.

The cook had stepped to one side and was watching uneasily. Doug mounted his horse, then looked down at him. He said, "When Quigley gets here, make it easy on yourself. Tell him anything you want to. Maybe it would be smart to pull out before he gets here."

The cook moistened his lips. His head bobbed up and down, but he made no other answer.

They struck off across the basin in a northwesterly direction. At the far western edge of the basin, a good day's ride from here, was the road which curved up from the Springerville road to Unitah Pass.

"Why don't you take the stage with me in the morning?" Fran asked, breaking a long silence.

He shook his head. "I have a job to do here—some graves to uncover."

"Graves?"

"Yes, graves. They were found on the Springerville trail. About two months ago, Fran, wasn't most of your husband's crew gone for a spell?"

A blank look showed on her face. "I don't know. I paid no attention to the crew."

"Do you know a man named Vic Leighton?"

"Yes."

"Does he still work for Roger Quigley?"

"He rode with the others to town this morning."

It was mid-afternoon before they sighted the men following them, a slow-moving dust cloud, far back across the basin. In an hour the dust cloud gained, and through it they could now make out close to a dozen mounted riders.

"By dusk they'll be where we are now," Doug said, estimating the ground to be covered. "Half an hour later they'll be unable to read our trail; it'll be too dark. They can camp for the night, or ride on to the road over the pass. It's my guess they'll ride on."

AROUND dusk they turned directly south, down a dry, rocky stream bed. Tomorrow, when it was light again, Quigley's crowd could backtrack to here and pick up their turnoff. But by that time, with any luck at all, Fran would be on the stage on the first leg of her trip to Kansas City, and he would have a good start on another day's flight.

Toward midnight, in the hilly country on the southeastern fringe of the basin, they stopped. Doug unsaddled, and staked out their horses. He risked building a fire to make coffee and to heat some of the tinned food Andy had secured for him. Fran Quigley, weary from the day's long ride, stretched out full length on the blankets he had spread for her, and watched him as he worked.

Later she drank her share of the coffee appreciatively, and ate the food he brought her. They let the fire go out after they had eaten. Doug spread his blankets near Fran's and lay down, turning on his side to face her.

"Comfortable?" he asked. "I could pull grass and make a sort of mattress for you."

"I can stand one night on the ground," Fran answered. "Doug, why won't you go to Kansas City with me?"

"I told you I have a job to do here."

"You don't know what you're up against. The men who died near Springerville didn't have a chance, either."

Doug's eyes had narrowed. "You know about that?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known?"

"I heard the story two nights ago. I was asleep on the couch in the parlor. Roger came in with Bill and Vic Leighton. They didn't know I was there. They got to talking, and I listened. Roger seemed worried that someone might have gotten away that night. Vic Leighton insisted all were killed—and told how it happened."

"Then they found you in the room."

She nodded. "And I made the mistake of letting them see how shocked I was. Then I made another mistake. I quarreled with Roger about it. Vic Leighton drew his gun. I think he would willingly have shot me. He said I had to be silenced, and there was only one sure way. But Roger said that in the next few days he would make up his mind what to do with me. The way he said it was frightening."

She shuddered, and Doug, picturing the scene, understood the fear which must have gripped her. He spoke with a gruff tenderness. "Forget it, Fran. You'll be safely away by noon tomorrow."

"Maybe I will," she answered, under her breath, "but I'll never sleep well again. I'll always remember that the man I married was a murderer."

"Could you tell me what happened above Springerville, as you heard it?"

She nodded. "Five of your father's men were killed as they sat at their campfire. They were murdered by men who crept up on them in the dark. Three others who were out night-riding the herd had to be run down and shot. Roger was afraid one might have gotten away, but Vic Leighton insisted no one did."

"How many riders were with Leighton that night?"

"Six others. Bill Quigley, Chuck Wheatley, Eli Jelbert, Joe Nyatt, Lem Fellerbach, and Harry Morse."

"Where's the money they got for the cattle?"

"I don't know anything about the money. There's a safe in the room Roger uses as his office, but I've never seen what was in it."

"I wish you could tell the sheriff what you just told me."

"I could," Fran said, "but what good would it do? He wouldn't believe me, and I couldn't prove a thing I said. I couldn't even prove seven men were gone from the ranch for about ten days, two months ago."

Doug knocked out his pipe. He sat up and stared into the darkness, scowling. "That's what my father faced," he said slowly. "He couldn't prove what had happened either. It's what I face."

He was silent a moment; then he asked, "You've friends in Kansas City?"

"I was born and reared there."

"What will you do in Kansas City?"

"Live at home again, go to parties and balls, wish you were there with me—and remember tonight."

"Is there a man back in Kansas City?"

"Several. I suppose I'll marry again someday, after I'm divorced. You could still come with me."

Doug stared up at the sky. He was changing his mind about Fran Quigley. She wasn't just an empty-headed girl who had married a rich cattleman and found life on a ranch impossible and boring. She was a sensitive and thoughtful woman. He was afraid it was going to take him a long time to get Fran out of his mind.

They rode on in the morning, as soon as it was light, and an hour before noon made it to the Springerville road. All morning there had been no sign of those who were pursuing them. The stage came by a little while later, and at Doug's signal it stopped. There was time then for only a final word.

"You know, I might make it to Kansas City someday," Doug said.

"I'll be waiting, if you do," Fran answered.

She smiled. It was a strained, tight smile, and her eyes showed how worried she was. She raised her hands to smooth back her hair, then turned quickly to the stage and climbed in. She waved from the window as the stage rolled on.

Doug climbed back on his horse again. Once more, then, by mid-afternoon, he saw Quigley's crowd, far behind him, but the trees of the river soon hid the fact that he was riding alone and leading Fran's horse. He turned east now, toward Waggoner, and after dark he kept on that way, riding at a pretty sharp clip. Late in the evening, after the moon was up, he swung north in the direction of the distant mountains.

He had three more days to wait until Andy got back. That meant three more days of riding, of tracking back and forth across the basin, unless he could lose the men behind him and hole up somewhere. The chances of that were slim, but worth the effort.

THE canyon was choked with brush. It had high, sheer walls up which a man would have a hard time climbing, and which were impossible for a horse. A mile from the opening those walls came together, making a cul-de-sac of the place to which Doug had been driven. He was trapped again, and it looked like a good tight trap this time. On three other occasions, during the past few days, Quigley's men had had him cornered, but each time he had managed to break away. This time, however, escape seemed hopeless.

It was growing dark. Quigley's men had thrown a picket line across the canyon opening, and now were gathering wood for fires, which they would keep going all night. In the morning, if he didn't ride out and surrender, they meant to burn him out. They could, too. It had been a rainless year; the underbrush was dry enough to blaze up beautifully.

Back out of sight of the picket line, Doug examined the left front foot of his horse. It was swollen from fetlock to knee from a pulled tendon. It was because his horse had started limping that he had turned in here, hoping that the men chasing him would ride on by. But they hadn't.

Doug moved toward the mouth of the canyon on foot, crouching close to the ground as he dodged from one bit of cover to another. The last twenty yards he covered on his stomach. And finally, flat on the ground, he peered out at the activity in the open.

Quigley's men were building up four woodpiles for four fires. Back of this line they had established a camp. Six or eight men were there, busy cooking the evening meal. It was still light enough to identify some of the men individually, and he noticed that Henry Royce and Gabe Pettit were in some sort of conference with Quigley.

This reminded Doug that, for several days now, it was a posse which had been chasing him. Royce and several other men from ranches in the basin had joined forces with Quigley's crowd. Of course he should be glad of that. If Quigley's crowd alone had cornered him here in this dry canyon, they probably wouldn't have waited until morning to set it afire. With the sheriff along, an attempt had to be made to get him to surrender, to take him alive.

Doug backed away from where he had been lying. He worked his way to the right, then crawled forward again. The gray color of evening had come into the sky, and the shadows were thickening. In another quarter

of an hour it would be dark. One of the fires the men would soon be lighting lay just ahead of him. Someone came up to it with a load of wood, dumped it, then walked away.

Doug took a quick look toward the other piles and the main camp, then started crawling forward. He got to his knees, stood up, stepped to the woodpile, and bent over it, restacking it. No one seemed to notice him, no one shouted an alarm.

Another man was coming up with wood. Doug turned his back that way. As the fellow drew near, Doug turned and straightened, drawing his gun. It was light enough to see the shocked look which crossed the man's face as he recognized the figure at the woodpile.

"Steady!", Doug ordered. "Don't make a sound. Drop your wood. We'll go for more."

The man dropped the wood he was carrying, and moistened his lips. His jaw worked up and down, but no words came from his throat.

"Come on," Doug said crisply, stepping toward him. "Didn't you hear me? I said we'd go for more wood."

He held his gun low and close to his body, hoping no one else would notice it. He was conscious of the movements of those walking to and from the other piles of wood, and of the men at the main camp. The horses were staked out there, near the main camp.

"We'll angle toward the horses," Doug said.

They drew near the horses and stopped. Dough eyed the one that was closest, a gray mustang with wiry lines. It wasn't saddled or bridled. A halter rope tied it to a tree. He had a knife to cut that rope. He glanced at the man at his side.

"Fellow," he said abruptly, "you'd better get more wood. Be smart, and don't start anything. Quigley wouldn't like it if he knew who had walked me near the horses."

"I won't start anything," the man answered. "But you'll never get away. Be sensible and surrender. If you ride off from here we'll corner you again tomorrow night."

Then the man turned away and moved off through the deepening darkness. Doug holstered his gun and drew the knife from his belt. He moved to where the mustang was tied, slashed the rope with his knife. In another instant he was astride the horse, clutching it with his knees and crouching low over its back as he raced away. He heard warning shouts then, and the spattering sound of gunfire. He had escaped on a bareback horse and without supplies. Without supplies, he would have to head for the basin.

LIGHTNING flashed in the sky, and there was the heavy rumble of thunder. Then the rain came, a heavy, cold, driving rain that wet him to the skin in the first minute. But Doug could laugh at the rain tonight. It was an ally, a force on his side. It would wipe out the tracks left by his horse. By morning the men chasing him would be back where they had started almost a week ago. They would know he needed food and a saddle, and for that reason might cover most of the ranches in the basin, but they might not think of looking for him at the Callander ranch.

It was near morning when Doug reached the Callander ranch, and it was still raining. He slid to the ground, slapped the mustang on the flank, and watched it trot off and disappear in the darkness. It would drift with the rain until it found some place of shelter to its liking, then would drift on in the morning. One of Quigley's men or some member of the posse might find it, but backtrailing would be impossible.

Doug leaned against the barn, rubbing his hands together, trying to get the stiffness out of them. He couldn't be sure Andy had returned. If he hadn't, Cy Liggett, who had been appointed caretaker of the ranch by the court, would be here. Liggett might not be very glad to see him.

Feeling began returning to his hands. He drew his holster gun, then eased it lightly back into its holster and stared again at the dark and silent ranch house. After a momentary hesitation he started across the yard toward it. When halfway there, he heard a sharp command from the barn doorway.

"Get 'em up, mister."

He lifted his hands shoulder high, and swung to face the barn. A man cradling a rifle came toward him, then stopped suddenly and cried, "Doug! I thought it might be you, but I wasn't sure." He hurried forward and

reached out to take Doug's hand. He was a thin, gaunt-looking man with a crooked nose. "I'm Lambert," he said, "Jim Lambert. Maybe you don't remember me, but I used to work for your father."

He led the way to the house, hammered on the door, and shouted for Andy. The door was opened. Someone lit a lamp, and Doug was pulled into the front room. Andy was there, Roy Webber, and Hondo Seibert. They started a fire in the stove and put on water for coffee. They found dry clothing for Doug, peeled off the wet things he was wearing, and got him a towel to rub down with. Lambert, who was on watch, went back to his post in the barn.

"We just got in tonight," Andy said. "We stopped in Waggoner on the way out here, and heard quite a story. We didn't know how much of it to believe. We came out here and decided to wait a day to see if you showed up. We don't know what we'd have done, come tomorrow."

Doug pulled a chair close to the pot-bellied stove in the parlor. He sank back in it and stared around the familiar room.

"Cy Liggett's in the other room, tied up," Andy told him. "He didn't appreciate having us walk in on him, didn't seem to think we belonged here any more. You know, there's one thing they're saying about you in Waggoner I know isn't true."

"What's that?"

"They're saying you kidnapped and killed Quigley's wife, but I saw her at the hotel in Springerville two days ago. She looked pretty much alive to me."

"Two days ago?" Doug repeated. "Are you sure of that, Andy?"

"Positive."

Doug leaned back in his chair, scowling. What was Fran doing still in Springerville? It was close to a week since he had put her on the stage. By this time she should have been in Kansas City. He shook his head, wondering why it made any difference to him what happened to Fran. If she wanted to stay in Springerville rather than go on to Kansas City, let her.

"Any news on the three men whose graves you couldn't find?" he asked, sitting up.

Andy poured a cup of coffee and carried it to him. "None at all. The boys weren't able to find a trace of them. But they did run across one interesting fact."

"What?"

"Irv Cozad was in Springerville the same time Quigley's men drove our herd in and sold it."

Doug's eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"Judge Faucet's a friend of mine. He's lived in Springerville a long time and knows a good many people from the Stoney River basin. I asked him who from around here had been in Springerville lately, and one man he mentioned was Irv Cozad. I checked at the hotel. Irv Cozad signed the register at the hotel the same day that Vic Leighton was paid for our cattle. Of course it might not mean anything."

Doug was nodding. That was true, it might not mean a thing that Irv Cozad had been in Springerville the day the stolen cattle were sold. On the other hand, it might mean a great deal.

WHAT these men had to say didn't add up to much that was helpful so far as their present problem was concerned. They had scoured Springerville and the area around it, searching for traces of the three men whose graves hadn't been found along the trail.

"Fran Quigley said none of the eight got away," Doug told them. Then he explained why he had helped Fran reach the stage line.

"What you did was on the order of your father's move in stampeding Quigley's herd," Andy said. "He knew he couldn't prove Quigley was responsible for what had happened on the trail, so he hit back as hard as he could. Quigley felt it, too."

"But this isn't getting us anyplace," Doug said. "How do we tie Quigley in to what happened above Springerville?"

They didn't have an answer for him. The murders on the trail and the theft of the herd had been covered up cleverly. The graves of those who had been slain could be pointed out. It could be established that men, other than those in charge of the herd when it left here, had delivered the cattle in Springerville.

But to prove that the men who had delivered the herd had been working for Roger

Quigley was another matter. The vague descriptions which had helped Sam Callander solve the mystery wouldn't stand up in a court of law.

Doug changed the direction of his thoughts. "What about Irv Cozad?" he asked abruptly. "You all know him. Where does Cozad stand in relation to Quigley?"

"He handles his legal work," Andy said. "But then, he handles practically all the legal work in the valley."

"I suppose there are a thousand reasons why Cozad might have to go to Springerville."

"Easily. But at that, he doesn't go there often."

"He never got married?"

"No. Several years back there was a rumor he was going to marry some woman from back East, and that he was going to buy the McAdams ranch and give up lawyering and become a cattleman. But nothing ever came of it. Quigley showed up, bought the McAdams ranch, settled on it, and our troubles began."

Doug sat up and glanced at the others. "Do you know what I'd like to do?" he said slowly. "I'd like to bring Cozad out here and talk to him, cold turkey. Maybe he couldn't tell us anything, but maybe he could."

Andy started grinning. "Why not? A couple of us could slip into Waggoner tonight, call on him, and invite him to take a little trip with us. He might not like it, but we could be mighty persuasive if we had to."

"Then here's something else we could try," Doug suggested. "We could pick up one of the men who had a part in the raid above Springerville. We could bring him here, too. Fran named those who were with Leighton that night. One, Chuck Wheatley, is dead. The others were Bill Quigley, Eli Jelbert, Lem Fellerbach, Joe Nyatt, and Harry Morse. Of those, which one might break down and talk?"

"The kid—Bill Quigley," Andy said.

Lambert nodded. "There's not much gumption in Quigley's son. He'd be the easiest one to crack."

"How could we get him?"

"We might pick him up at Hannah Touissant's some night, or in town at Ellen Hodson's, or Beth Meyers's. After a few drinks, when he's in town, he usually heads out to see Ellen or Beth. How about it, Doug? Do we ride in to Waggoner tonight?"

Doug nodded. It seemed like the only possible plan. "We'll do it like this," he began.

He broke off as Roy Webber, who had been watching from the yard, came hurrying in.

"There's a crowd headed this way," Webber said. "Six or eight men."

"Quigley?"

"Could be."

Doug got to his feet. "Is Liggett still in the other room?"

Andy nodded.

"We'll go have a talk with him," Doug said. "We'll give him a chance to send them away. Maybe, with a gun in his back, he will. Come on."

THERE were eight in the crowd which pulled up in the yard in front of the Callander ranch house. Four of them Doug recognized—Quigley, Eli Jelbert, Joe Nyatt, and Vic Leighton. He wasn't positive of his identification of Leighton, but he was almost sure that the tall, thin, stony-faced man who rode at Quigley's side could be no one else.

Cy Liggett stood in the partially open doorway to the ranch house and stared out at them through bleary, red-webbed eyes. Liggett was terrified at what had happened to him, and was very much aware of the pressure of Doug's gun against his back.

"Everything quiet out here, Liggett?" Quigley called.

Liggett's head bobbed up and down. "Plenty quiet."

"Vic, Joe, Harry, take a look in the barn," Quigley ordered. "He might have holed up here, though it isn't likely."

The man Doug had decided was Vic Leighton, and two others, rode to the barn, dismounted, drew their guns, and went inside. Quigley shifted his weight in the saddle. He looked tired. His eyes were deep shadowed and the lines in his face were heavy. There was a definite hunch to his shoulders.

The three men who had entered the barn came out again, their guns holstered. "There's no one in there," Leighton reported. "I still say he headed for town, that we'll find him

somewhere in town—or in one other place."

"One other place? Where's that?" Quigley asked.

A wry smile crossed Leighton's face. "It's just a notion I have. I'll check on it myself. How about hitting Liggett for some coffee?"

Doug Callander, crouching behind Liggett, his gun against the man's back, held his breath while he waited for Quigley's reply.

"There's no time for coffee," Quigley said. "We have too much ground to cover. Let's ride on."

The men who had searched the barn remounted their horses and in another moment the entire crowd rode on, slanting across country in the direction of Carl Schinn's ranch.

Doug reholstered his gun, straightened, and mopped his face. He said, "Liggett, you did all right. Maybe you've earned the right to live a while longer."

Liggett backed into the room. He started shaking. "This isn't easy on me," he mumbled. "I'm on no one's side. The court sent me out here."

"Tie him up again, Andy," Doug ordered.

He walked to the window and stared through it in the direction taken by the men who had just been here. Something Leighton had said was troubling him. What had he meant by saying he had a notion where Doug might be hiding, and would check it himself?

Could it be it was Hannah's he had in mind? It seemed very possible. Leighton surely had heard Doug had gone to Hannah's after his escape from Quigley's barn. Bill, who had run into Doug there, would have told him. Since Doug had once turned to Hannah for help, it might be presumed he would go there again.

They left for Waggoner by mid-afternoon—Doug, Andy, Jim Lambert and Hondo. Roy Webber, much to his disgust, drew the assignment of remaining at the ranch, where he would stand guard over Liggett. They angled toward the Stoney River, south of the town, and made it there by dusk, and in luck. No one, so far as they knew, had seen them.

"There's an old barn on the east edge of town where we can leave our horses," Andy suggested. "It isn't being used, and I doubt if Fred Hiles, who owns it, ever goes out there."

Doug nodded. This plan appealed to him more than that of leaving their horses in the trees along the river. He remembered what the sheriff had told him about keeping a watch on the river when there were troublesome times.

"When we get in, I'll take a scouting trip around the town and see what I can learn," Andy continued. "I got to know Waggoner pretty well while I was hiding out, waiting for you to show up."

Again Doug nodded. This seemed like another good idea. As it grew darker they rode on, swinging around to approach the town from the east. Andy led them to the barn he had mentioned, then slipped away, while they settled down to await his report on what he could learn.

HE WAS gone half an hour. When he returned he had a sobering report. "We couldn't have picked a worse night," he told them. "Quigley's bunch is in town; I caught a glimpse of Bill, Joe Nyatt, Eli Jelbert, and several more who ride for him. Henry Royce was on the street, and I saw Schinn and Musselmann, and Gabe Pettit. At a guess, more than half the basin's in town tonight. It isn't going to be easy to get from here to Cozad's without being spotted. Do we try Cozad first?"

"Yes," Doug said.

"If three of you could handle him, I could try to keep an eye on Bill."

"Then do that, Andy. But don't get caught again. It won't go as easy on you next time as it did the last."

They left the barn and cut through the town toward the main street. Doug crossed it first, up near the stage station. Jim Lambert came next, then Hondo. Andy remained behand. From back of the stage station, they angled toward Cozad's. There was a light in the attorney's home.

They walked to the house and knocked on the door. Cozad answered it almost immediately, and his eyes widened as he saw who was on the porch.

He gasped, "Doug!" Then he looked quickly at the other two men.

"Jim Lambert and Hondo Siebert," Doug said. "They rode for my father. I imagine you know them."

"I know them," Cozad admitted, frowning. "But I thought—that is, I'd heard they'd left."

"They came back," Doug said.

"I suppose you know what they're saying about you here in the basin," Cozad said.

"I think I do," Doug admitted.

"Where is Fran Quigley?"

"She was in Springerville, the last I heard. By now she's probably on her way to Kansas City."

"I hope you can prove it, Doug. Or I hope we can reach her in time to save the posse from shooting you down. They're saying you kidnapped and killed her."

Doug rubbed his jaw. "You know, she might still be in Springerville. Who do you know down there you could write to?"

"Several men," Cozad answered, "but none well. I don't get there very often. Haven't been there for a year."

Doug reached into his pocket for his pipe. He tried to hold a noncommittal expression on his face. He was aware of a sharpening excitement, but didn't want Cozad to know it. In what he had just said, the attorney had lied. He had been in Springerville only two months ago. Why had he said he hadn't been there for a year?

He lit his pipe and said, "Cozad, you told me the other day that Quigley wasn't in good shape financially. What happened to the twenty-five thousand dollars he collected for my father's cattle?"

"He has it stashed away somewhere."

"Then he isn't in such a bad fix, is he?"

"I suppose not."

"Two months ago, at the time of my father's cattle drive to Springerville, did Quigley go there?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't. It wouldn't have been a wise move on his part."

"You mean he trusted Leighton to collect the money and return here with it?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Why not?"

"Twenty-five thousand is a lot of money. If Leighton had disappeared with it, what could Quigley have done? He couldn't have turned the law on Leighton without involving himself in the massacre of my father's men. What better chance will Leighton ever have to get away with a big chunk of money?"

"Maybe he didn't think of it."

"Like hell. I'll tell you what happened. Someone else was on hand to relieve Leighton of the money as soon as he got it—someone Quigley could trust. Who would that be?"

"His son?"

"Bill? I doubt it. Bill doesn't carry the weight to buck a man like Leighton. Quigley must have had some agent to collect it. Who could it have been? Think, man, think. Who picked up the money for the cattle?"

COZAD passed his hand over his thinning hair. He glance at Hondo and Jim Lambert, and there was a definitely uneasy look in his eyes. He said, "Damn it, I don't have all the answers. Maybe I can figure it out, but—"

"Then will you do this, Cozad? We're going to get the answers! Tonight, if we're lucky, we're going to pick up a man who can give them to us. We're going to take him out to the ranch for questioning. Can you come with us? I want an impartial witness to what he says."

"You mean you're kidnapping someone else?"

"Put it that way if you want to."

"And you're taking him to the Callander ranch?"

"That's right."

The attorney shook his head. "The Callander ranch is the first place the posse's going to hit tomorrow morning. That is, if they have no word of you before then, they're going to start their search from there. Bring your man here, tonight."

"We don't feel very safe here in town," Doug said. "I think we'll take a chance on the ranch. Can you come with us?"

The attorney frowned. "I'd like to, Doug, but I can't."

"Let me put it this way, then," Doug said bluntly. "You're going to the ranch with us. You can go with us willingly, of your own choice, or you can go bound hand and foot. Which will it be?"

Cozad gulped and took a step backward. He was breathing rapidly. He looked wildly around the room, as though searching somewhere for help. Then, with no warning at all, he broke for the back door.

Jim Lambert caught him as he got there. His gun whipped up and down, and Cozad collapsed and dropped to the floor. The brief cry which broke from his lips wasn't loud enough to have reached beyond the room.

Doug said, "Help me get him across my shoulder. We'll go out the back way."

In the darkness back of the house, Doug lowered the attorney's body to the ground and stooped over him for a moment. Then he stood up and glanced at Hondo.

"Move around to the side of the house," he suggested. "Keep an eye on the street. We'll wait here until Cozad's able to walk. If we were seen carrying him, we'd attract too much attention."

Hondo moved away. They stood waiting, then, for the attorney to regain consciousness. He groaned and made an effort to sit up. He tried it again and managed it, and started mumbling incoherently.

"Feel able to walk?" Doug asked.

The attorney took a deep breath, looked at Doug, and shuddered. "What do you want from me?"

"As I told you in the house a minute ago, I want you to go to the ranch with us," Doug answered. "I'm going to have someone there for questioning. I want a witness to what is said."

Doug helped him to stand. They moved around the side of the house in the direction taken by Hondo, who stopped them when they reached him.

"There's someone across the street, under the trees," Hondo whispered. "It could be Andy—or it could be someone else."

Doug stared at the trees across the street. He couldn't see anyone in the black shadows they cast. He could feel his muscles tightening. They couldn't afford to be discovered until they got back to their horses, and it was a long trip back there.

"Wait here," Hondo continued. "I'll try to find out who it is."

Doug expected him to slip away through the darkness and circle toward the trees, but he didn't. Instead, he moved straight ahead, rounded the front of the house, and started across the street at an angle. There wasn't much light from the sky, but the man watching the house couldn't have failed to see him. Doug drew his gun.

"Jim," he ordered, "watch Cozad."

He hurried on to the front corner of the house, half angry at Hondo for the risk he was taking, and blaming himself for not having called him back. There was movement in the shadows under the trees. The man standing there stepped forward, walking to join Hondo, and in spite of the darkness Doug identified him as Andy Rawls. The relief he felt made him weak.

"Bill Quigley's calling on Ellen Hodson," Andy said.

"And where does Ellen live?"

"Not far from here. I can show you the house."

"Who'll be there?"

"Only Ellen's mother. She's a seamstress. She and Ellen run the dressmaking shop that used to be run by Mrs. Fisher."

Doug looked over at Hondo, nodding. He said, "Hondo, you and Jim walk Cozad to the barn where we left our horses. Walk him between you and cross the main street up beyond the livery stable. Andy and I will pick up Bill Quigley. If you have any trouble with Cozad, get rough."

He said that loud enough to be overheard by the attorney. Then, with Andy, he stood watching as Hondo and Jim Lambert, with the attorney between them, started across the street.

ELLEN HODSON and her mother lived in a small house near the edge of town. A saddled horse was tied at the fence which surrounded the yard—Bill Quigley's horse. Lamplight showed at the curtained windows of the house.

"I'll just walk up and knock on the door,"

[*Turn page*]

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Doug said. "If Ellen or her mother answer it, they won't know me. I'll tell them I have a message for Bill, which should sound reasonable. If Bill comes to the door, I'll cover him with my gun and we'll walk him away."

"Sounds too easy," Andy said.

"Sure. But we're entitled to a few breaks, Andy."

They moved up to the door. Doug knocked and stood waiting, his hand close to his gun. Andy flattened himself against the wall of the house, to one side. From within the house a muffled voice, Bill's voice, came through the door.

"I'll get it, Mrs. Hodson. I'll see who's there."

At the same time Doug heard the sound of hoofbeats from up the street. He jerked a quick look over his shoulder. Someone was headed this way. A horseman loomed out of the darkness, pulling in toward the house.

"Andy," he whispered quickly, "move to the corner of the house. Cover the man on the horse. Drive him off if you have to."

Andy scrambled toward the corner of the house, where he would be away from the light of the door when it opened. And the door was opening just as the horseman coming along the street pulled up at the fence gate. Doug didn't look around, he didn't dare to. He hoped that the man out at the gate, who could see only his back, wouldn't recognize him. But he could be sure Bill would, and Bill was his immediate concern.

He drew his gun and held it close to his body, aimed to cover Bill Quigley as he opened the door. And it was Bill who opened it. A look of shocked surprise jumped into his face when the saw who was on the porch.

"Hey, Bill," called the man who had reined up at the fence, "Your old man wants to see you right away. Who's that with you?"

"Send him away," Dough ordered in a whisper. "Tell him you'll be riding into town in a minute."

Bill's lips moved, but no words came through them. The lamplight reflected from the room gave his face a pale, yellowish tinge. It showed a clammy perspiration gathering on his forehead and around his mouth.

"Say, what the hell goes on here?" called the man at the fence, a tight note of suspicion in his voice. "Bill, what's wrong?"

The man out there would be drawing his gun in another minute. Doug was sure of it. "Andy," he called in a low voice, "chase him off."

Andy Rawls stepped away from the corner of the house, his gun half lifted. He shouted, "Ride on back to town, Morse. We'll be there with Bill in a minute or two."

The gun in his hand suddenly whipped level. Doug heard the booming sound of its explosion.

He heard the echoing blast of another shot fired from the gate, and heard the man there give a high, hoarse cry. Then he must have wheeled his horse around, for Doug heard the sound of the horse running away. It was time to get away from here, to get out of Waggoner, if they could make it. He stepped back from the door, motioning to Bill.

"Come on," he ordered, "We're going for a ride."

"Where?" Bill gasped. "You can't get away with a thing like this, Callander."

"Maybe not, but I'll try it anyhow," Doug said. "Do you want to die here, or take a chance on coming through alive? Make up your mind quick."

He lifted his gun, his finger tightening on the trigger, and he must have looked as though he meant what he said, for Bill didn't argue any longer. He stepped quickly out on the porch.

Dug took the gun from Bill's holster and dropped it into his pocket. Andy came over to join them.

"That was Harry Morse," Andy said. "I hit him, but not bad enough to knock him out of the saddle. In about two minutes this part of town will be alive with Quigley's men, searching for us."

"In two minutes we'll be gone," Doug said. "Get the rope from Bill's horse. Cut off a length to tie his hands behind him. Then we'll boost him into the saddle. I'll head east from town, but circle around to the river, west of here. You get the others. I'll meet you where we crossed the river earlier tonight."

Andy nodded, and hurried to where Bill's horse was tied.

FIVE GRAVES WEST

IT WAS well after midnight before they got back to the Callander ranch with the two prisoners. Roy Webber met them in the yard when they rode in. He drew Doug aside.

"I probably did wrong," he said, frowning, "but I kept her here, Doug. She didn't like it."

"Who?" Doug asked.

"Hannah Touissant. She's in the house."

"How did she happen to come here?"

"She was on her way to town from Schinn's, where she had gone to see Molly Schinn. She stopped by to say hello to Cy Liggett, who used to work for her husband. The way he acted made her suspicious; I could see that. So I decided to keep her here. I didn't want her talking out of turn."

Doug nodded soberly. He couldn't blame Roy Webber for what he had done. Faced with the problem of what to do about Hannah, he had made what seemed to him the only possible decision. And perhaps it hadn't been a poor decision, even though Hannah resented it.

He heard a sound on the porch, saw the door open, and against the dim light from the room beyond saw the slender figure of Hannah Touissant. She came outside, walked to the edge of the porch, and stood staring into the yard, where the men were unsaddling.

"Mr. Callander," she called. "Mr. Callander, I'd like to talk to you."

"Just a minute," Doug answered.

He walked back to the corral and found Andy. It had been his plan to take Cozad and Bill Quigley into the house and question them there, but he wasn't sure now of the wisdom of such a course, in view of Hannah's presence.

"Maybe we'd better take Bill and Cozad to the barn. See that they're both well tied. I'll have a talk with Hannah, then join you."

"One of the men killed that night, one whose grave we found, was Tom Crossen. Tom was just a kid, about seventeen. I thought a powerful lot of young Tom Crossen. Can I start questioning Bill Quigley?" Andy said.

Doug reached out and put his hand on Andy's arm. He said, "Steady, Andy. We want information that can be built into proof. This isn't just a time to get even." He turned and walked to where Hannah was waiting.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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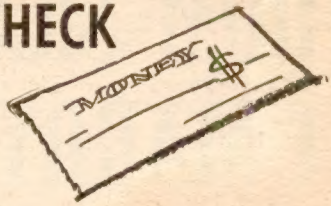

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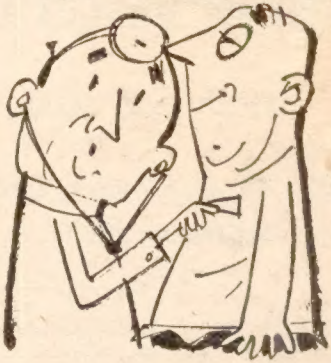

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

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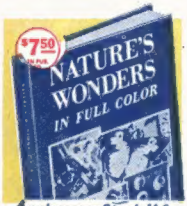

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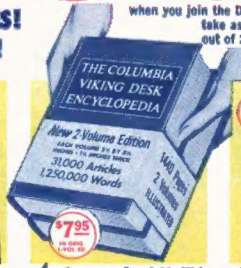

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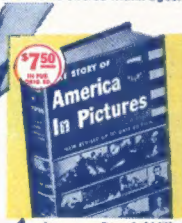

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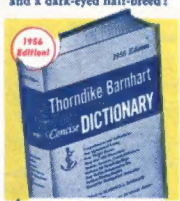

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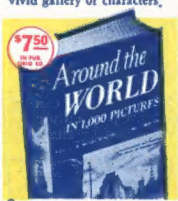

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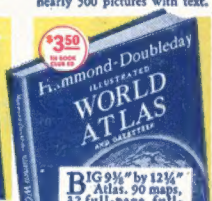

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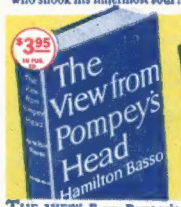

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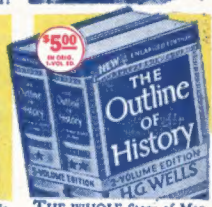

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